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In Search of Authenticity: Arbitrating the Politics of Narration in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*

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Abstract

Using poststructuralism, this essay argues that Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988) dismantles the hierarchical relationship between mainstream authoritative discourse and Native American narratives regarding cultural authenticity and legitimacy. Employing interlaced narrative layers and making mainstream discourse itself an object of storytelling, *Tracks* allows oral and communal accounts to emerge as vehicles of co-writing, writing back, and un-writing dominant discourses about Native American culture. For centuries, official and scientific discourses monopolized the production of the public image of the Native American experience, often favoring textuality as an authentic medium of historical narratives. Acting as agents of empirical discourse, natural scientists produced a "credible" textual history for institutions and made artifacts out of excavated Native American "objects." However, because Native American stories were considered incompliant with the epistemological conventions of history writing, they only functioned as a source material of mythological patterns for academic study by sociologists and structural anthropologists. Challenging this trend, Erdrich's novel reconsiders "cultural authenticity" and its relationship to the medium of narration.

Keywords: Native American narrative authenticity; counter narratives; Western narrative hegemony; poststructuralism; authenticity.

1. Introduction: Official Production of the Native American Experience

The title of Louise Erdrich's novel *Tracks* (1988) suggests that narration is an act of recovery in the face of loss. Further, the dialogical layering of narrative voices in *Tracks* adds a political dimension to the act of recovery, whereby recovered native memory resists the hegemony of Western narrative and its advocacy of print-culture in general. Understanding the politicization of narrative in Erdrich's text mandates a brief recourse to the history of the official and unofficial mechanisms of narrative production which the novel directly or indirectly responds to. Less than a year after the publication of the first edition of Erdrich's novel, National Geographic published "An Indian Cemetery Desecrated: Who Owns Our Past?" to shed light on the questionable methods employed in collecting Native American bones and artifacts and selling them to museums and anthropologists. In the 1980s, Native American activism reached peak level in demanding the repatriation of ancestral remains, with activists usually citing religious beliefs regarding the spirits of the dead (Gulliford 1996, 181).

Marking the conflict between official and communal narratives, a legal war ensued between native activists and museums, including those associated with universities, where researchers cited the right to engage in scientific inquiry. Critic Gerald Vizenor warns against viewing the legal contention in terms of the binary opposition between science and superstition (1986, 328). Similarly, historian Curtis Hinsley

asserts that the repatriation legal battle "is ultimately not over control of bones at all, but over control of narrative" (Gulliford 1996, 121). Vizenor's and Hinsley's statements indicate that official discourse potentially serves an ideological role whereby it appropriates the past and culture of native communities, thus acting as a hegemonic tool. For over two centuries, anthropologists relied on unethical methods under the guise of empiricism to produce a "reliable" official history of Native Americans in ways that had immediate repercussions on their rights and justified certain cultural attitudes towards them. On the other hand, oral traditions and religions, deemed unverifiable by scientific discourse, functioned as figurative, rudimentary sources inferior to western positivism and the print-culture the west celebrates. Therefore, it is no surprise that Native American oral culture, myth, and literature celebrate the trickster figure that assumes different shapes-positive and negative-yet rejects fixed or binary borders, and by implication hegemonic logic/dominant narratives. According to William Hynes, trickster figures keep disseminating through border lines whether these lines are "religious, cultural, linguistic, epistemological, or metaphysical" (1993, 34). This means that the trickster figure, being rooted in Native American oral cultural traditions, can be seen as a reaction to Western cultural and literary discourses.

By contrast, this article projects the need for indigenous histories (counter narratives) and presents *Tracks* as a historical novel in a special sense, using multiple, overlapping narrators and challenging the historical realism favored by western print-culture. The linkage between poststructuralism and postcolonialism in matters of power relations at the language/institutional level (i.e. poststructuralism under the umbrella of postmodernism) and at the political level of decolonization (historical or discursive) is worth acknowledging. Moreover, it is established that a cultural and postcolonial critic like Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) built on Foucault's poststructuralist project on power/knowledge dichotomy. Under both theories, discourse/language itself becomes a contested site of power relations. While postcolonial theory can be a helpful framework, especially with regards to more recent aspects of the Native American experience, the authors believe that the poststructural approach more aptly fits the novel's unique take on narrative authenticity, oral traditions, and myth-making. As the article demonstrates, critics like Vizenor and Gulliford have brought attention to the role of anthropological knowledge in shaping official discourse about Native Americans. Poststructural analysis is an effective tool for deconstructing such discourse. However, to the authors' knowledge, existing research on Erdrich's *Tracks* does not adequately apply poststructural analysis to highlight the importance of oral narratives or to juxtapose official and Native American discourses.

2. Narrative Authority and Counter Narratives

Contrary to official and mainstream discourse, which privileges textuality and implies the inferiority of oral traditions, Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* levels rigid narrative hierarchies. By making Western empiricism and official discourse objects of storytelling (playfully but sometimes nostalgically and bitterly), the novel allows oral and cross-generational storytelling to emerge as narrative platforms capable of co-writing, writing back, and at times un-writing aspects of the official Western narratives of native history. *Tracks*, however, does not employ storytelling to offer a final Truth. Instead, Nanapush's

and Pauline's stories, albeit offering conflicting accounts of the Native American experience, serve as qualifiers and modifiers of official narratives. While many critics, including Nancy J. Peterson, Catherine Rainwater, Sheila Hughes, and Douglas Andrew Barnim, engage in insightful analyses of the relationship between narrative voice and communal loss and memory in *Tracks*, the political connection between narration and notions of "truth" and "authenticity" has been noticeably absent from most critical conversations. Furthermore, contemporary critical discourse on *Tracks* does not sufficiently engage poststructural theory to highlight the role of narration as a disruptive medium of resistance.

Passed on from one generation to the next primarily by means of the spoken word, the value of Native American oral narratives—if perceived from a Eurocentric philosophical point of view—correlates with Michel Foucault's definition of the spoken word as the "female part of language" in the *The Order of Things* (2002, 43). Although language appears in its "authentic state" when spoken, Foucault further explains, it finally bows to the "sovereignty" of the written word, which is the ultimate medium of scientific discourse (2002, 311). If, in the Foucauldian sense, Western print-culture treats textual as male and the oral as female, then Erdrich's intricate layering of narrative devices renders a figuratively androgynous combination of the textual and the oral capable of producing native histories which are far more complex than "chauvinistic" official monologues under the guise of positivism. The figuratively androgynous form of the novel infinitely defers access to a "true" native story by contrasting narrative reality with empirical reality, and showing that the latter is, potentially, similarly constructed and can only negotiate, rather than eliminate, the oral. Such tension between oral narratives and empirical discourse, as implied by the novel's decentralization of textual historicity, cannot be settled by verifying the "truthfulness" of a present construction, *a story*, against a presumed pure past, *the Story*. The latter will always be muddied by the former. The factuality of the final form of the oral (the utterance) and that of the text (the script) can be verified, hypothetically, only by quantifying the gap between the present signifier and the signified past. Orality and textuality approach this distance differently. While a claim to demonstrable validity is readily implied in positivistic historicism, orality relies on immediacy and bidirectionality of discourse for credibility. However, anthropological discourse, and not just oralism, can be an ideologically mediated pointer to an ideal episteme of the "Past," and not a transparent reflection of it.

The association between the past and ownership of remains in the question posed by the title of National Geographic's magazine article calls forth the familiar association between power and history writing. To unravel the implications of the underlying tension between science and tradition, it is necessary to highlight the philosophical and narratological implications of their troubled relationship. In other words, the critic needs to further polarize the supposed binarism in order to deconstruct it.

In his figurative defense of Indian American bones' right to self-representation in "Bone Courts," Vizenor critiques the hierarchical relationship between the written and the spoken by complaining that tribal traditions are "held in linguistic servitude" to "science monologues" (1986, 26). Examples of this "linguistic servitude" can be seen in major anthropological works in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In *Crania Americana* (1839), anthropologist Samuel George Morton argues that, due to the

average Caucasian skull being larger than skulls of other races, the "Caucasian race" has "the highest intellectual endowments" compared to the "American Race," which is "slow in acquiring knowledge" (1839, 5). Due to the growing advocacy of native rights, twentieth-century anthropologists started to shift their focus from bones to language and kinship systems. In *Structural Anthropology* (1963), Claude Lévi-Strauss emphasizes the need to create "terms general enough" to document the different kinship systems across cultures (1983, 62). Lévi-Strauss' proposition, albeit more equitable than Morton's, inevitably puts native cultures in servitude to the jargon of the anthropologist operating from within western institutions. Kimberly Roppolo, director of Native Writers Circle of the Americas, attaches the label "anthropologism" to the "well-meaning" discursive practices which attempt to "catalogue" aspects of Indian life only to end up rendering them the "intellectual property" of the critic (2001, 264).

Breaking free from this servitude requires a reconsideration of epistemic hierarchies. In *The People Named the Chippewa*, for example, Vizenor tampers with the order of things by hailing the spoken word's violation of "grammatical time" as "original" (1984, 7). However, for poststructuralist critics, reversing the hierarchy between text and speech is a prescriptive rather than a descriptive approach to human language. For example, Jacques Derrida rejects the idea that speech can be more original than writing. He argues in *Of Grammatology* that "writing is not a sign of a sign, except if one says it of all signs, which would be more profoundly true" (1976, 43). While Vizenor's privileging of orality over textuality is a counter-hegemonic critique against the tyranny of text, it offers a reversal the anthropological dichotomy. Unlike Vizenor's approach, Erdrich's novel does not produce a clear-cut reversal of the dichotomy, neither does it suggest that orality is the most reliable medium of narration. Doing so would have raised a new dilemma, for writing and textuality today are the most common mediums for disseminating knowledge about oral tradition. The fact that Erdrich inevitably uses the written novel, which is a Western genre, demonstrates the need for a more complex view of the relationship between the written and the oral. Her novel neatly captures this complexity.

3. Erdrich's Fragmentation of Narrative Authority

While Erdrich's *Tracks* empowers oral narratives, it remains Derridian in its rejection of any type of narrative hierarchy. There are moments in *Tracks* where Indian narrators harken back to an original past with anguish and a sense of loss, but regression is never achieved. Early in the novel, Pauline, a mixed-blood and one of the novel's two first-person narrators, subtly positions two narrative devices, the spoken "word" and the "track," alongside each other as she tells an unnamed listener about how she lost her family to an epidemic which claimed the lives of many Indians: "That winter, we had no word from my family…No one knew yet how many were lost, people kept no track" (1988, 15). Pauline's anguish about such a tragic incident which was neither spoken nor written sets a tone of irretrievable loss which will prevail over the rest of the novel. Her grief, however, is not only about the loss of life; it is also about a story of death that has not been satisfactorily preserved. It is as if the ability to connect with the tragic past and mold it using narrative devices allows that past to finally rest, thus making the present bearable. But in *Tracks*, the past never rests or settles even when it is narrated. This is as much the result of the

unavoidable incapability of language to intactly preserve the past as it is a hallmark of Erdrich's versioning of history–strategic or otherwise–which rearranges the power relationships of multiple narrative angles: the textual, the oral, and the anthropological. Although the novel's two trackers/narrators are incessantly pursuing the past in order to make peace with it, it remains distant from them because their experience is always mediated by multiple narratives: the contradiction between their oral stories; the text itself which does not resolve narrative conflicts; the tactics of the government with regards to keeping a reliable track of native life and land; and the clash between Catholicism and the Anishinabe religion in representing stories of life and death. With such a variety of narrative threads, it helps to think of *Tracks* in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of the novel "as a diversity of languages…and a diversity of individual voices" (1981, 262). However, this diversity is not simply characterized by idle coexistence. Rather, the narrative stratification in Erdrich's novel, where text is the container of orality, produces a constantly metamorphosing heteroglossia with an ongoing conflict between centralizing forces and decentralizing voices. Bakhtin explains this uninterrupted process in the novel:

> And this stratification and heteroglossia, once realized, is not only a static invariant of linguistic life, but also what insures its dynamics: stratification and heteroglossia widen and deepen as long as language is alive and developing. Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward. (1981, 272)

In *Tracks*, narrative threads are always unsettling one another. Instead of achieving truth, the "uninterrupted work" of intersecting voices and ideologies keeps preventing narrative closure.

Although critic Nancy J. Peterson convincingly suggests that it is impossible for novelists to have an uncontaminated link to the past, her claim that all one has is "recourse to texts about the past" instead of a "direct access to the past" does not adequately reveal the tangled nature of narrative layers in *Tracks* (1994, 983–4). Textuality is not the only layer where full access to the past is obstructed in the novel. Talking caressingly to his granddaughter Lulu, Nanapush, the second narrator, reminisces: "My girl, I saw the passing of times you will never know. I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot" (1988, 2). Nanapush's narrative is textual for the reader, but it is oral for Lulu. The narrator, nevertheless, emphasizes that oral communication cannot guarantee absolute, "authentic" knowledge. Because of this imperfection of narrative, Peterson's argument that "Erdrich's writing lays tracks here for a revisionist history and a new historicity" can be problematic (1994, 986). Historical revisionism, if unqualified, presumes that–partly due to its legalistic undertone–some narrative devices can both access and deliver a "purer" form of pastness than others, and, therefore, are able to resolve an epistemological deadlock. Alternatively, it makes more sense to fall back on semiotics and argue that the more versions of "truth" narrators or historians make available, the more likely it is that each version will be inadequate without the others.

However, to limit the relationship between these versions of narrative in *Tracks* to an elementary Saussurean model of signification, where a sign is only definable by the negation which other signs

exercise against it, would be to assume that, once negated, a narrative sign becomes an absolute. Structuring signs this way ignores their co-narrative function in the novel. In other words, *Tracks'* orality, its textual form (the novel as a commodity), and even its portrayal of colonialist/anthropological constructions are in a state of narrative codependency. This does not mean, however, that orality in the novel–or writing back in any post-colonial context–does not engage in an act of resistance. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha maintains that the exchange between competing narratives relies on disturbance: "Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries— both actual and conceptual—disturb those ideological maneuvers through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" (2012, 213). Similarly, theorist Susan Friedman detects Erdrichs' deconstruction of "fundamentalist certainty about fixed truth." However, for her, "hard-won truths" are still a possibility (1994, 108). Bhabha's and Friedman's emphasis on a deessentialized "truth" captures the complexity of Erdrich's novel–although, one can possibly argue, Friedman's suggestion that "hard-won truths" are achievable implies that the dialectics of history can be eventually settled. By disturbing and exerting influence against each other, narrative devices produce a temporal and tainted image of reality. The result is hard-won misrepresentations, not truths. In order to show how narrative "disturbance" transfigures rather than freezes the past, it is necessary to unpack the narrative layers operating in *Tracks* while conceiving of their relationship as one of political, rather than, mathematical negation.

Tracks abounds with instances of excavation, which we are using here to refer to the hegemonic anthropological practices of the colonizing power which rely on empirical tools and methods to historicize, control, or even profiteer from "discovering" native artifacts, culture, and history. As a hegemonic practice, excavation relies on its political capacity to narrate a version of "Truth" which can be materialized and invested. That is, being a narrative device, excavation derives its force from the legal and scientific discourses which marry "Truth" to power. For the most part, the reader can see excavation from the viewpoint of Nanapush. Complaining to Lulu about how the Chippewa Indian community suffered both displacement and loss of land, Nanapush documents the destructive effects of colonial empirical/legal discourse: "Pukwan kept us back, convinced he should carry out the Agency's instructions to the letter. He carefully nailed up the official quarantine sign" (1988, 3). Although carried out by tribal police–or a willing native collaborator, one might legitimately say–the agency's instructions and the official sign represent the colonizer's way of *overwriting*, by means of medical knowledge and governmental force, the native ways of handling death. Governmental instructions threaten to replace what Nanapush in the novel describes as the "secret ways to cure or kill," which seem to have "deserted" the native tribes (1988, 2).

Further, the native relationship with nature is repeatedly contrasted with the government's capitalistic goals in the novel. Nanapush "thinks like animals" and has "a perfect understanding of where they hide" (1988, 40). "Land is the only thing that lasts life to life", Nanapush once tells Lulu. "Money," however, "burns like tinder, flows off like water," he proceeds (1988, 33). Natives Americans in the novel also have an eschatological relationship to trees, which they use to bury the dead. They also view lake

Matchimanito not merely as a source of livelihood, but as a metaphysical world about which stories can be told. If religion, from a postmodern viewpoint, functions as grand narrative which endeavors to explain the story of creation, the lake spirit, Misshepeshu, who can reward and punish, can also be viewed as a metaphysical embodiment of justice. The government, on the other hand, employs "surveyors" who "measure" the lake and cause deforestation by exploiting land as a natural resource (1988, 8–9). The value of the land is finally fixed by writing while it is appropriated "underneath the gravel of the auctioneer," because "There were so few…who understood the writing on the paper" (1988, 99). By materializing the things that spiritually matter to the lives of Indians, the self-serving colonial practices textualize and appropriate "Indianness" into a resolved signifier and an early chapter in the grand narrative of civilizational progress.

Anxiety over how excavation defaces Indian culture continues to haunt Nanapush and appears in many of his stories. One time, he reflects on how the originality of his own name is at stake. He complains to Lulu: "My girl, listen well. Nanapush is a name that loses power every time it is written and stored in a government file" (1988, 32). Nanapush seems to realize here that the erosion applied by the written word is a political force. However, every time he shows signs of resistance against the government's textual authority, he inherently acknowledges its power and ends up reproducing the textual in the oral. Citing the postcolonial critic Helen Tiffin's memorable statement, "[d]ecolonization is process, not arrival," Gloria Bird's is skeptical about applying postcolonial theory to *Tracks* because counter-discourse cannot be immediately spotted in Indian American writing (1992, 40). Bird seems to frame postcolonial counter discourse as the undoing of the past of colonization. Counter discourse, however, cannot reverse the past of colonialism. Rather, it de-essentializes colonialism's cultural constructs–to use Bhabha's earlier concept. The colonized and the colonizer will be part of each other's history. In *Tracks*, the erosive textual practices have become an essential part of the story which Nanapush is telling Lulu. Similarly, while excavation threatens to overwrite aspects of Indian American life, it produces an ironic outcome: excavation accentuates the significance of the overwritten and triggers in Nanapush an awareness of a tragic loss which deserves to be narrated.

The written media of legal and scientific discourse, then, is not "playing solo" in the novel. Since Native American history has been traditionally communicated through oral narratives, for a novelist to tell "what happened" to Native Americans without the oral would be to deny the semiotically feminine and politically non-Western perspective of Native American history. Glossing over the oral would undermine the hybridity and androgeniery of discourse. Douglas Barnim emphasizes the role of "narrative memory" in creating "hybridized identities." He also adds that "hybridity is both a source of trauma and a site of recovery (healing)" (2010, 54). Orality, it should be noted, is an immediate interface of the memory which enables hybridity and healing. Andrew Wiget, editor of the *Dictionary of Native American Literature*, outlines the uniqueness of orality as a cohesive medium: "In writing, the axis of communication is unidirectional, whereas oral communication is genuinely bilateral and interpersonal" (1996, 6). However, Wiget later emphasizes, "[i]t is nevertheless true that authoring in an oral, as opposed to a written, literature did not usually imply the kind of proprietary interest that today accrues to the

creator of something unique" (1996, 12). Before exploring the techniques used in *Tracks* to recreate the spirit of the oral, it is worthwhile emphasizing how delicate Erdrich's task is.

If, epistemologically, the text is the realm of fixed knowledge and the oral is the realm of volatile and amorphous memory, and if legal discourse anchors text to the individual while orality loosely roams the communal space, then the main ordeal facing Erdrich's narratological design is the inevitability of enclosing the volatile in the static. This "need" for the static text, however, is not so much in resonance with Vizenore principle of "linguistic servitude" as it is a reflection of the ironic existence of the colonized. Relying on the medium created by the colonizing power acknowledges the ambivalent nature of the dominant culture, which emerges as both humane and destructive. The oral will no longer be the same inside the text; but neither will the text. The written will give shape to the reader's experience of the oral, of which only the traces are left. Consequently, the reader is bound to misread if s/he does not co-narrate with Erdrich's intricate narrative scheme. That is, the novel adds to the reader's burden by asking her/him to see through an opaque textual outside in order to have a certain experience of the oral inside.

In spite of the difficulties presented by these generic distinctions between orality and the novel as a Western genre, Erdrich's *Tracks* skillfully offers a window to native orality and employs it as an essential vehicle of meaning-making. Erdrich's approach best manifests itself in her ability, on one hand, to bend the textual form in favor of allowing more space for the oral, and, second, her ability to render the oral a medium of history production capable of archiving anthroplogism, which, until the late 1980's, monopolized the right to archive. The structure of the text serves this approach.

A nine-chapter novel, *Tracks* has two narrators: the elderly, "blanket Indian" Nanapush and the out-of-control, mixed-blood adult, Pauline. They take turns narrating episodes of the Native American experience between 1912 and 1924. There is no omniscient narrator to moderate the shift from one narrator to the other. This technique creates an effect of a warm, around-the-fire setting of storytelling. More interestingly, all of Nanapush's stories are addressed to a second person listener, Lulu, instead of an implied or distant novel reader. The reader, however, enjoys a bird's-eye view of oral exchange. The first-to second-person channeling of narrative voice is essential in simulating the intimate immediacy of one-to-one oral communication. Nanapush repeatedly uses "my girl" to talk to Lulu, and every time he does so, he invokes her to "listen" (1988, 2, 32, 57). The age gap between the elderly Nanapush and the young Lulu, in addition to Nanapush's protective attitude, reinvents the unifying role which the oral performs when communicating "tradition" across generations. To illustrate, both the first and the last sentence of the novel start with Nanapush's communal "We." The first sentence laments loss of life whereas the last celebrates how Nanapush and Lulu "held on in the fierce dry wind" (1988, 1, 266). Both of these utterances emphasize togetherness irrespective of the nature of the experience. Nanapush's narrative authority, therefore, emanates from his eligibility to "represent" a "we." He gained this eligibility by aging and suffering with the community. Nanapush continues the tradition of a created "textual identity" which E. Shelley Reid detects in the works of Erdrich (2000, 67). In one of the brilliant moments in the novel, Nanapush's metafictional reflection on the unique experience which animates oral narration proves to be a valuable key for reading his narrative identity:

Talk is an old man's last vice. I opened my mouth and wore out the boy's ears. But that is not my fault. I shouldn't have been caused to live so long, shown so much of death, had to squeeze so many stories in the corners of my brain. They're all attached, and once I start there is no end to telling because they're hooked from one side to the other, mouth to tail…I got well by talking. Death could not get a word in edgewise, grew discouraged, and travelled on. (1988, 46)

Nanapush's reflection on his special role in his community connects suffering with a poetic responsibility to his people, particularly the younger generation of Indians who are now melting into a hegemonic white culture. More importantly, oral narration does not end like all forms of life. It is, rather, synchronous with the cyclicality of life and death. If writing vents the writer's neurosis, "talking" also has a healing power. It allows the orator to hold on and to outlive painful experiences. Nanapush's celebration of orality, nonetheless, is sometimes more nostalgic than cheerful. Earlier, he complained that "before the boundaries were set…an old man never had to…listen to his silence" (1988, 32). The social role of the tradition of oral narration, Nanapush here laments, is gradually diminishing by ceding to external forces.

Pauline's narrative role, on the other hand, contrasts with Nanapush's in a variety of ways. Because of the way other characters dismiss her integrity, the extent to which her stories are qualified to capture the native history can be problematic. Not only do Pauline's stories contradict Nanapush's, but she later rejects her hybrid origin and adopts a westernized, supremacist point of view which is antagonistic to the natives. Further in the novel, she is painfully disillusioned with her conversion to whiteness. Because Pauline oscillates between the native point of view and the "white," "Catholic" point of view, her tales can be read either alongside or against Nanapush's. On one hand, the novel's semi-egalitarian parallelism–shifting back and forth–between Pauline's stories and Nanapush's might indicate that both of their narratives qualify as oral modes of telling in spite of the fact that Pauline lacks an explicit listener. Susan Castillo refers to an interview with Erdrich where she explains the use of the pronoun "we" by Nanapush. Erdrich learned from a friend that in the language of the Athabaskan Indians of Alaska, there is no word for "I," and the equivalent of "we" is used instead. Castillo suggests that "we" can represent both Pauline and Nanapush (1991, 293). Similarly, critic Sheila H. Hughes views this "double sense of narrating" as a "dialogue" between the novel's two narrators. However, she does not detect any "structural privileging" of one narrator over the other beyond the number of chapters assigned to each (2000, 89).

On the other hand, privileging one narrator over the other does not need to be structural. At face value, the absence of a listener in Pauline's stories presents her, at least temporarily, as less capable of "preserving" Indian heritage and passing it to the next generation than the experienced Nanapush. Pauline probably lacks a listener not in spite of her membership in Indian culture, but because of her abandonment of that culture; her fantasization about whiteness and racial purity, if left without ridicule, would defeat the hybrid structure of narration. In this sense, questioning Pauline's narrative voice is not an exclusionist move. Rather it is a rejection of Pauline's exclusionism. Accordingly, Pauline's failure to find a listener is a fault of her self-absorbed, Indian-shunning attitude. As a result, the self-loathing Pauline ("self" being her Indian half) loses while Nanapush keeps winning (Friedman 1994, 108).

Further, to apply Foucault's and Vizenor's approach to speech, if Nanapush's orality is within the realm of authenticity, how would his disapproval of Pauline influence the credibility of her narrative perspective? This happens when Pauline describes the supernatural incidents which Fleur, a Native American with otherworldly powers, experiences at the butcher shop and the smokehouse. Pauline's story goes that everyone who has done wrong by Fleur got punished in mysterious circumstances, and no one dared to come close or question Fleur afterwards. Impatient with Pauline's story, Nanapush disregards her as being "born a liar, and sure to die one" and since her "practice of deception was so constant…that it got to be a kind of truth" (1988, 53). In addition to undermining Pauline's character, Nanapush's dismissive association between deception and truth might be a subtle condemnation of the concept of absolute and hegemonic Truth itself, which relies, very much like Pauline, on advancing a specific account of the past that mainly benefits one group to the exclusion of another. There's only narrative or perspectival truth, Nanapush's stance seems to suggest, but not an absolute Truth.

The novel also emphasizes the significance of Nanapush's storytelling by giving him the first and the last words. If Nanapush's stories are the novel's oral container, then Pauline's stories can either be part of his stories about deception, or disruptions against which his oral originality is established. Because Pauline and Nanapush are the only narrators presented, the reader is left with the dilemma of arbitrating their narrative integrity. An issue emerges here: if Pauline is unreliable, how should the four chapters where she is the narrator be conceived?

Before dealing with this question, Pauline's credibility should be looked at from other angles as well. Probably, nothing problematizes Pauline's narrative credibility as much as her denial of her Indian roots. After so many Chippewa died, Pauline asked her father to send her to a white town where she could work with Catholic nuns. "You will fade out there," her father said. "You won't be Indian once you return." "I wanted to be like my mother, who showed her half-white," she answered. "I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian…to hang back was to perish" (1988, 14). Pauline's comprehension of what is "pure" and, more ironically, what is "Canadian" presents these concepts as synonymous to "white." Obviously, seeking racial purity in her case can be an act of desperate denial of her biological determiners. But Pauline does not stop at that. She extends her resentment of her Indian roots from the denial of the biological to the denial of the cultural. She converts to Catholicism, actively tries to convert other Indians, and repeatedly disdains their beliefs: "They could starve and fornicate…worship the bones of animals or the brown liquor in a jar. I would have none of it. I would be chosen, His own, wiped clean…" (1988, 196). Pauline's conversion, Susan Friedman maintains, starts a "battle" between Catholicism and the Anishinabe religion (1994, 113). This conflict, however, is more about identity than religion. Since Pauline is biracial by birth but "pure," all white, and Catholic by choice, her most outrageous lie is the one she tells to herself. If she is untrue to her own Indian half, she cannot be trusted to tell the truth about other Indians. By making these decisions, Pauline becomes detrimental to her own narrative credibility and makes her already complicated narratives even harder to decode.

Unpacking the question on how to read Pauline's narratives when she is untrustworthy, then, relies on the reader's perception of her character within the context of her political situation in the novel. Two

opposite possibilities immediately come to mind: Pauline may be oppressed, but she can also be an oppressor. In other words, Pauline's character can be legitimately read as an agent of a dominant culture threatening to replace *old* with *new* by relying on her insider knowledge and dismissal of the Chippewa beliefs. If she can pass off as Indian, she can only do so by using her Indian half as a mask in the service of her white side. If her case is exclusively approached as such, she is as responsible for trying to erase her Indian roots as the colonial institutions which recruit her. At the same time, however, Pauline might be looked at as victim of political, cultural, and religious institutions which encourage racial mobility by privileging some races and cultures over others. Pauline continues to harbor Indian beliefs even after her conversion to Catholicism. Whether she is oppressor, oppressed, or both, Pauline's narrative communicates a story of one culture melting into another. She feels uncomfortable in the liminal space of dual existence she was born to. She seems to believe that just by burying one story and foregrounding another, she would set herself free from liminality. By telling the story of her whiteness, she conflates ontological with the narrative states of being.

Another reason behind Nanapush's problem with Pauline's narrative credibility, nevertheless, might be his mistrust of all mixed-bloods. For instance, the Morrisseys, a half-white family with whom Nanapush has some unsettled disputes, try to live like whites and work hard to hide their native roots. After all, Nanapush cannot disprove of Pauline's narrative credibility based on empirical invalidity, for Nanapush himself relies frequently and unquestioningly on native reality for curing and interpreting his surroundings. Therefore, the narratological discordance between him and Pauline might be rooted, from his standpoint, in politico-racial differences. Yet, in spite of his resistance, these differences coexist and produce narrative ambivalence. Nanapush's oral dialogue and Pauline's soliloquy overlap in many ways. They reference similar people and events, though in different ways. While their narration alludes to orality, they cannot–due to the technical limitations of the external textual framework–engage in a bidirectional relation with the reader.

A few questions emerge from this situation: what is the point of the novel's allusion to the orality of the voices of Nanapush and Pauline if readers can only consume the novel as a text? Or, what is expected from readers if all they have is a text? Is orality in a state of eternal bondage to textuality in *Tracks*, then? If not, how does orality exercise its counter-hegemonic power? The answer to these questions is related to Erdrich's layering of narrative devices introduced earlier. That is to say, *Tracks* is a story about storytelling, not just about people experiencing a sequence of events. "What" is told by Nanapush and Pauline is as important as "how" it is told. Instead of chronologically telling Lulu how he adopted her, he establishes an emotional connection with her: "This is where you come in, my girl, so listen" (1988, 57). He starts to matter-of-factly narrate the supernatural circumstances surrounding her birth. By presenting the "how," and not just the "what," as a norm which is at the brink of extinction, the novel makes the reader a witness of two tragedies instead of one: the tragedy of the people but also the tragedy of convention. However–and to address the second question–the created sense of victimhood should not mean that orality's bondage to textuality is an immutable fact of the life of colonized people. Erdrich actually masculinizes orality by excavating room for it within the textual. Orality and textuality, therefore,

are engaging in narrative cross pollination. They exercise mutual influence and neither of them is the same anymore.

Erdrich's technique of making orality capable of performing counter-hegemonic influence over the textual layer involves rendering the latter insufficient for solely channelling the "empirically" improbable narrative reality. Indian tricksterism then comes into play. It allows the oral to deconstruct the discursive authority of the supremacist anthropological mindset. After Lulu is born and Father Damien starts to ask about the infant's name because he "must complete the records," Nanapush reveals his trickster side: "There were so many tales, so many possibilities, so many lies. The waters were so muddy and I thought I'd give them another stir" (1988, 61). Nanapush seems to believe that the government's effort to "record" the birth incident would bring the many "tales" and "possibilities" surrounding that birth to a definite conclusion. For him, the textualized and abridged "record" of birth is incapable of capturing the complexity of the story he was telling. Therefore, he lies about Lulu's parentage and, by doing so, feels empowered. Most importantly, by interfering in the rules which define credibility, historicity, and "the order of things," he disperses the control over the meaning of the novel's events. The record of birth, as well as other signs of "official" documentation, have become for Nanapush what historical facts are for Hayden White: "fictions of factual representation." Narrative and facts, White further suggests, "overlap, resemble, or correspond with each other" (1978, 121). In the novel, there are many versions of the story of Lulu's birth: the story Nanapush tells; what Lulu makes of this story; what the government officials and Father Damien make of it; and what the readers think they know about it. Nanapush's manipulation of the official birth record is also reminiscent of Derrida's dismissal of Lévi-Strauss' ethnocentric definition of writing, where drawing letters on paper (or what Derrida calls "writing…in the colloquial sense") is the benchmark of meaningful communication, while native ways of recording are merely imitation (1976, 125). For Derrida, "the end of writing is political" (1976, 127). But so is Nanapush's subversive rejection of writing in the novel. If speech can alter reality through lying, Nanapush's ploy demonstrates, recorded history does not guarantee pure knowledge because it can also be manipulated. Such manipulation of the status of writing achieves another function. It rises to a metanarrative evaluation of the novel itself, where the act of reading the textual exterior does not by itself guarantee a comprehensive and pure knowledge of all the strands of meaning in the oral narratives contained therein. The text is not the final fact of the oral; it's only another construction of a story, or to invoke White again, another "fiction." In fact, pure knowledge of the events is not guaranteed at all in *Tracks*. Rather, as in the story of the birth record, what matters is experiencing the narrative.

Both Nanapush and Lulu narrate events which science cannot explain. For example, Pauline is so jealous of Fleur she believes even Misshepeshu, the lake monster, wants her for himself (1988, 11). Later, she believes that Fleur can transform into an animal and that she has claws (1988, 12). Like Nanapush, she believes dreams constitute part of reality, and she seeks the help of Moses, who uses his native knowledge to make magical medicine powders and dreamcatchers (1988, 80). In one of the most evocative moments of the novel, Pauline narrates how she used "puppet strings" to force Eli and Sophie to have sex for many hours. She controls their orgasms and derives pleasure from exhausting their bodies

"past their limits" (1988, 84). The feelings of jealousy and sexual fulfillment seem to be real only in Pauline's world. But since she is the narrator, she has the power to create and encrypt her own reality. To comprehend her version of reality, the reader has to experience her narrative through her senses by allowing her to puppeteer the act of reading itself.

Even after her conversion to the Catholic faith, Pauline does not stop believing in the Indian religion and continues to interact and explain the world through it. She imagines the Christian God through Indian lenses. She experiences a dream-like epiphany of salvation and forces it on her physical reality. God sits on the stove and starts talking to her. He tells her that she is chosen to serve. She now thinks that her shadow, which is moving while she is not, is Satan. Indians, she believes, are not protected by Misshepeshu the same way she is protected by God, and she sets out to prove this (1988, 137–9). Catherine Rainwater provides a structural reading of Pauline's conversion to Catholicism. For her, the religious tension is a reflection of a conflict between two worldviews. She reads what she calls Pauline's war on the "pagans" in light of other dichotomies of time and kinship which distinguish Indian from western cultures. For her, Pauline's liminality is the result of simultaneously internalizing these conflicting cultural codes (1990, 407). However, Pauline's disdainful attitude to Indian beliefs is only verbal. Her denouncement of her faith is as superficial as her rejection of the reality of the Indian half of her body. Unable to make a full transformation or even to convert other Indians, she eventually realizes the "purgatory" she is living in (1988, 151). Both conversions, from mixed-blood to white and from Anishinabe to Catholicism, are pronounced and achieved only oratorically. The only thing that changes about her is the narrative identity, which becomes more visibly hybrid, but her actual convictions and interracial origin remain bound to her older, biological self. The double, schizophrenic life she leads becomes the novel's statement on the irreparable rupture between rhetorical "truth" and physical reality.

Nanapush also tells Lulu many stories which cannot withstand scientific scrutiny. He sees smoke dogs and ghosts of dead people in the forest, and like Pauline, believes Indians can be half animals (1988, 35). More importantly, within the lenses of his narrative reality, the oral is not the medium of "mythology" as defined by western structural anthropology. Rather, it plays a role similar to that of religion by being the framework of a story of creation. For example, while Fleur was delivering Lulu, Nanapush narrates how "the woods spoke through Fleur, loose, arguing…I recognized them. Turtle's quavering scratch, the Eagle's high shriek, Loon's crazy bitterness, Otter, the howl of Wolf, Bear's low rasp" (1988, 59). *Tracks* also brilliantly disarms modes of reading which fail to withhold empirical judgment. This occurs when Nanapush dreams a remedy for Fleur's ailment in chapter seven. It requires rubbing his arms with certain herbs and putting them in boiling water before he could cure Fleur's sickness. The irony occurs when Pauline, now a Catholic nun, comes forward to prove Christ's way and expose the falsehood of native ways:

> She prayed loudly in Catholic Latin, then plunged her hands, unprepared by the crushed roots and marrows of plants, into the boiling water. She lowered them further, and kept them there. Her eyes rolled back into her skull and the skin around her cheeks stretched so tight and thin it nearly split. If she opened her mouth, I thought, pure steam might blast into the air. (1988, 187)

Nanapush here experiments with two religions by subjecting them to the test of scientific evidence. He strategically allows Christianity to "lose" the contest in a very symbolic, painful moment. His purpose, it seems, is not to disqualify the dominant religious discourse of the hegemonic culture, but rather to qualify his people's religious narrative as an equally meaningful story of creation. Scalding her hands, Pauline is then disillusioned about her religious favoritism. Although not posing as a scientifically credible narrator himself, by telling such a shockingly cynical incident, Nanapush succeeds at least in placing Indian orality in a position parallel to that of Christianity in terms of historic and logical probability.

4. Conclusion: Un-Layering Narratives

The reader's understanding of the events in the novel should not be based on how probable or realistic they are. The interplay between narrative truth and empirically demonstrable knowledge is part of the story. Once judgment is withheld, one can see beyond the textual veneer, which, in *Tracks*, is the framework mediating between the reader and the oral and communal stories. The reader has to see beyond the mediating veneer so that the oral could participate in shaping the narrative. This is because the discrepancies between Pauline's and Nanapush's stories cannot simply be settled at the textual level. What seems supernatural at the empirical level is narratively real, not just for the two narrators, but also for other Native American characters. Orality, therefore, is made the deepest layer of narration. But it is only one of three layers of narrative–legal/empirical methods and the novel's text being the other two. Erdrich deconstructs textuality and ridicules anthropologism in order to show that, like orality, their historicity is not empirically absolute, but rather contextual and mediatory. The three narrative layers co-produce meaning in the novel, and the relations between narrative devices becomes as signifying as the stories themselves.

In Search of Authenticity: Arbitrating the Politics of Narration in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*

البحث عن الأصالة: تقييم سياسات السرد في رواية *(الآثار)* للكاتبة لويز إيردريك

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الملخص

يستخدم هذا المقال إطار تحليل ما بعد البنيوية للبرهنة على أن رواية *(الآثار)* (1988) للكاتبة إيردريك تقوّض العلاقة الهرمية القائمة بين الخطاب السلطوي السائد من جهة والقصص المتداولة لدى السكان الأمريكيين الأصليين فيما يتعلق بقضايا الأصالة والشرعية الثقافيتين من جهة أخرى. فمن خلال توظيف مستويات سردية متداخلة وجعل الخطاب السائد بذاته موضوعاً سردياً، تُبرز رواية الآثار قدرة الحكايات الشعبية والشفوية للسكان الأصليين على مقارعة الخطاب المسيطر بخصوص الثقافة الأمريكية الأصلية. فقد احتكر الخطابان الرسمي والعلمي عملية إنتاج الصورة العامة لتجربة السكان الأمريكيين الأصليين لعدة قرون مضت، وقد تحيز هذان الخطابان للوسائط الكتابية باعتبارها الأكثر مصداقية في نقل الروايات التاريخية. وقد اتخذ علماء الطبيعة دور الوصي على الروايات التاريخية لإنتاج تاريخ نصي يحظى بالمصداقية لدى النخبة الأكاديمية، كما حوّلوا الآثار المكتشفة الخاصة بالسكان الأصليين إلى مجرد "أشياء" للعرض في المتاحف. وفي المقابل، وباعتبار أن حكايات السكان الأصليين غير متوافقة مع المنهج الاستقصائي في إنتاج التاريخ، فقد تم النظر إليها على أنها مصادر أنماط أسطورية للاستخدام كمواد دراسية عند علماء الاجتماع وعلماء الإنسان من أتباع المنهج البنيوي. لذا تقوم إيردريك في روايتها بتحدي هذا التوجه حيث تتيح للقراء إمكانية إعادة النظر في مفهوم الأصالة الثقافية وعلاقتها بوسائط السرد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المصداقية السرديّة لروايات السكان الأمريكيين الأصليين؛ الروايات المضادة؛ هيمنة الرواية الغربيّة؛ ما بعد البنيوية؛ الأصالة.

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