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ECOLOGICAL DISPLACEMENT AND INDIGENOUS RESILIENCE: NAVIGATING TRAUMA AND SURVIVAL IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *TRACKS*

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Abstract

This paper explores the themes and narrative techniques in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, focusing on the interwoven relationships between people, place, and identity. Erdrich's works often challenge traditional narrative structures, using multiple narrators and non-linear storytelling to explore complex themes such as family, community, and cultural survival. In *Tracks*, she highlights the traumatic effects of colonization, particularly through the Chippewa experience, and examines how the destruction of traditional subsistence practices—like hunting and gathering—by Euro-American settlers undermined Indigenous kinship and environmental systems. The analysis adopts an ecocritical lens to show how Erdrich's portrayal of nature reflects the Ojibwe worldview, where land is seen as a living, spiritual entity tied to cultural identity and survival. Through vivid metaphors and symbolic representations of nature, Erdrich critiques the ecological degradation caused by colonial capitalism and emphasizes the ongoing spiritual and cultural connections Indigenous people maintain with their ancestral lands. Ultimately, the paper underscores the significance of Indigenous ecological knowledge in fostering a more respectful relationship with the natural world, offering potential solutions to the contemporary environmental crisis.

Keywords: Colonization, Chippewa, Colonial Capitalism, Ojibwe

Louise Erdrich's novels out of chronological sequence may become confused because they are part of a vastly interwoven body of work. Even readers of her previous works may find the intricacy of character interactions difficult to understand, particularly in later volumes. Erdrich frequently uses family trees to help maintain narrative coherence. The relationship between people and place, the importance of community in its widest sense, the subtleties of identity (both cultural and personal), and the ongoing fights against marginalization, displacement, and cultural erasure are just a few of the major themes that. "Her fiction, moreover, is ripe with family and motherhood, storytelling, healing, environmental issues, and historical consciousness", all of which are consistent with larger tendencies in modern Native American literature (Rainwater 271). She provides examples of how past traumas,

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such as war, disease and oppressive government practices have severely weakened traditional Indigenous kinship structures, especially among the Chippewa.

Erdrich does not give preference to any particular cultural paradigm. Instead, by incorporating both viewpoints into her stories, she deliberately blurs binary distinctions, such as Indigenous versus European worldviews. Her books challenge the presumptions that underlie both Indigenous and Euro-American ideologies, even though they are grounded in Native epistemologies (Shackleton 202). Erdrich challenges linear narrative standards by employing many narrators that provide contrasting and perhaps opposing viewpoints across multiple temporal frames. According to McClinton-Temple and Velie (111), this multivocal storytelling style challenges readers' conventional notions of reality, temporality, and narrative authority. Her cyclical structures which frequently start and finish with loss are a reflection of the oral traditions that inform them.

The concept of land becomes prominent in *Tracks*, particularly when viewed through Nanapush's point of view. Even though they each have government-granted allotments, Nanapush and Fleur eventually lose their homes because of financial difficulties. After being forced to leave the reservation, Fleur sends her daughter Lulu to a government boarding school, causing them to suffer a separation that is both a survival and a sorrowful act. Long-standing Indigenous subsistence traditions were disturbed when Euro-American immigrants destroyed animals. According to Joy Porter, "this systematic non-Indian destruction of wildlife made subsistence economics unviable. Such impossible conditions led to demoralized dependence on government agents for rations and further subversion of the main supports of tribal life". (52) During a famine in *Tracks,* Nanapush describes how government-issued food, rather than traditional knowledge or individual creativity, were necessary for survival: "In the end, it was not Fleur's dreams, my skill, Eli's desperate searches, or Margaret's preserves that saved us. It was the government commodities sent from Hoop dance in six wagons". (*Tracks* 171)

A developing area of ecocriticism looks at how literature depicts how people interact with nature. Many contend that a worldview that disregards ecological ethics and commodities land is to blame for the current environmental disaster. This note highlights the difference between the biocentric worldview of Indigenous cultures and the anthropocentric attitude of Western thought by using ecocritical theory to analyze Tracks through an environmental lens. The land is a living, ancestral presence that is deeply entwined with everyday life and spiritual existence for Native tribes; it is neither lifeless nor objectified. Erdrich utilizes fiction as a vehicle for cultural testimony and ecological advocacy, drawing on her Ojibwe roots.

Many Indigenous people still maintain cultural practices that reflect a deep spiritual and ecological awareness of the land, despite the fact that they no longer have governmental sovereignty over their ancestral lands. These tribes reinforce a holy human-nature bond through storytelling. Erdrich laments the end of this bond in Tracks, examining how colonial capitalism's monetization of nature not only destroyed ecosystems but also confused people's spiritual and cultural orientations. Ecological damage caused by the lumber industry disrupted sacred ecological linkages and threatened biodiversity.

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Buell et al. state that ecocriticism examines how human-nature relations are portrayed in literature, highlighting how human and environmental histories are interwoven. (Buell et al, 2011, 417) The characters created by Erdrich exhibit a keen awareness of their environment. For example, Nanapush tells Lulu that he aged with each fallen oak and that he could feel the soil trembling as trees were felled (Erdrich 9). "The very land they had inhabited and inherited from their ancestors was snatched from under [them] at every step," he bemoans the legal machinations that made eviction possible (*Tracks* 4). Erdrich emphasizes the emotional and spiritual connection between people and the natural environment by bringing nature to life through rich metaphorical language—trees groan and reach, breezes whisper.

The characters of Fleur and Eli best represent this ecological intimacy. Eli finds human social connection alienating since he is so engrossed in the rhythms of nature (Erdrich 40). The protagonists grow sensitive to the rhythms and silences of nature as a result of their intimate relationship with it. Erdrich grounds Ojibwe cultural memory in weather and physical terrain. The eerie snowfall that occurs at the beginning of the book—"like the snow [they] continued to fall" (*Tracks* 1)—metaphorically connects natural cycles and collective misery. Disease is the "bitter punishment" (2) brought on by harsh winters that are made worse by congested living circumstances. According to Indigenous cosmology, environmental carelessness is the cause of these disasters—not taking care of Mother Earth invites divine vengeance.

In *Tracks*, nature is both living and powerful. Lakes pass judgment, wind turns into a healing power, and trees groan and extend their anthropomorphic limbs. It is reported that Fleur, who is strongly associated with elemental powers, drowned a guy in a lake. The fact that nature spares her and punishes others, confirming her strong spiritual connection to the land, only serves to enhance her fabled status. For Erdrich's characters, identity and survival are inextricably linked to their terrain. Nanapush informs Lulu that "land is the only thing that lasts life to life" (33). Spiritual strength, a sense of personal rootedness, and cultural continuity are all derived from the land. Losing it would mean losing an essential aspect of who you are. The relationship endures even after dispossession: blood, according to Nanapush, continues to flow through the earth (31). Not spared is the hallowed Pillager area, home to legendary characters like Misshepeshu. With a lingering odor that recalls both humiliation and salvation, Nanapush reflects harshly on the community's complicity in its own disinheritance (176). The land no longer accepts its original guardians after it has been cleaned, and opportunists such as the Lazarres seize what is left (184).

The extent of electronic intrusion is made clear in the novel's last chapters. "Shouts of men" and "the faint thump of steel axes" drown out the natural music of birds and leaves (206). The woods get eerily quiet, indicating the withdrawal of nature. When trees are destroyed, entire ecosystems collapse, animals stop stirring, and shadows stop whispering (209).

The Earth is revered as a living, protective mother in Native American spirituality. This worldview provides crucial ethical direction in a time of rapidly deteriorating environmental conditions. Restoring a more respectful and balanced relationship between people and the natural world may be possible by adopting Indigenous ecological ideas.

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