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Louise Erdrich: The Aesthetics of *Mino bimaadiziwin*

Deborah L. Madsen

The author of thirteen novels, four volumes of poetry, a short story collection, two books of non-fiction, five children's books and a textbook on writing, Louise Erdrich is one of the most prolific, most read and most acclaimed contemporary North American writers, though she is often specified as an ethnic Native American writer. She has been the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, in 2000 she was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers Circle of the Americas, and in 2009 received an Honorary Doctorate from Dartmouth College, her *alma mater*. Among the writing honors she has received is the Pushcart Prize for poetry and the 1984 National Book Critics Circle Award for her first novel *Love Medicine*, the short story 'Fleur' was awarded the 1987 O. Henry Prize, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* was a finalist for the 2001 National Book Award, and the 2006 Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction was awarded to her novel for young adults, *The Game of Silence*, while *The Plague of Doves* was a finalist for the 2008 Pulitzer Prize and won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Prize, an award that honors works that enhance understanding of cultural diversity and racism. With the exception of this latter award, then, the formal recognition of Erdrich's work signifies the wider place she holds in the canon of contemporary American literature. Indeed, in interviews she has commented upon the labeling of her work as that of an ethnic American Indian writer. In a 1986 conversation with Hertha Wong, she remarked:

> I think of any label as being both true and a product of a kind of chauvinistic society because obviously white male writers are not labeled 'white male writers.' However, I suppose that they're useful in some ways. I could as well be 'woman writer' or whatever label one wants to use. But I really don't like labels. While it is certainly true that a good part of my background … and a lot of themes are Native American, I prefer to simply be a writer. Although I like to be known as having been from Turtle Mountain Chippewa and from North Dakota. It's nice to have that known and to be proud of it for people back home. (Chavkin and Feyl Chavkin, 31)

However, the quality of Erdrich's work as that of a Native American should not be under-emphasized. Her characters, geographical settings, themes, imagery, plots and stories draw heavily from her Native inheritance. Erdrich is, as she remarks above, a member of the Chippewa tribe. Chippewa is the legal US term to describe the 'Ojibway' or 'Ojibwa' people, who form a large part of the Anishinaabe tribal group. 'Anishinaabe' is the term used by members of the group to identify themselves; the chapters in this book refer to Erdrich's tribal affiliation variously using these terms. As I will suggest below, Erdrich's core theme is the Ojibway concept of the 'good life'--*mino bimaadiziwin*—even though opportunities for living well, with courage, generosity and kindness are limited for her characters, many of whom are of mixed native and European descent, who live under conditions of colonization and within a history of physical and cultural genocide.

Erdrich and Native Place

Karen Louise Erdrich was born on 7 June 1954 in Little Falls, Minnesota and is an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain band of Chippewa Indians. Her parents, Ralph and Rita Erdrich, both taught in the Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school, Wahpeton Indian School, and encouraged the

creativity of all their seven children: Heid and Lise Erdrich are also accomplished creative writers. Erdrich is of mixed native and European descent: her father is German-American and her mother Chippewa-French. She grew up in Wahpeton, North Dakota, remaining there until 1972 when she went to Dartmouth College in New Hampshire to study in the then-new Native American Studies program. In her commencement address to the Dartmouth graduating class of 2009, Erdrich recalls:

> The morning I was to leave for Dartmouth, from my home in Wahpeton, North Dakota, which I'd hardly ever left, I was so afraid that I almost did not go. I applied in the first place because my mother, a strong Turtle Mountain Chippewa woman, had seen a picture of the winter carnival ice sculpture in a National Geographic Magazine, and noted Dartmouth's historic commitment to educating American Indians. We didn't think about co-education, or what it would mean to be so far from home. I'd never been on a plane. (Web)

Her experience at Dartmouth enters into Erdrich's writing in various ways, not least because from her junior year her writing began to attract awards. Dartmouth figures most prominently in the novel she co-wrote with her former husband Michael Dorris, *The Crown of Columbus* (1991). This mystery-thriller begins with the heroine Vivian Twostar working late in the Dartmouth library when she accidentally discovers what she believes is the lost diary of Christopher Columbus, the 'treasure map' that the characters hope will lead to the eponymous crown. One of the several jobs at which Erdrich worked whilst a student at Dartmouth was at the old reference library microfilm desk. The collaboration between Dorris and Erdrich represented by this novel began at Dartmouth: Dorris had also arrived in 1972 to head the new Native American Studies program. Their correspondence continued after Erdrich's graduation; she returned to Dartmouth in 1979 as writer-in-residence after completing an MA in Creative Writing at Johns Hopkins University. They married in 1981 and, in interviews, describe how their collaboration shaped every word they each wrote. While they published under the pseudonym 'Milou North', the travel memoir *Route Two* and *The Crown of Columbus* are the only books to bear both authorial names. The non-fiction book *The Blue Jay's Dance* (1995) provides insight into Erdrich's life as a writer and mother during her time in Cornish, New Hampshire with Dorris. This memoir is in part a writer's diary and partly a domestic or maternal autobiography but the overarching theme is the relationship Erdrich enjoys with the natural environment of the region surrounding the remote farmhouse she shares with her family. The landscape of New Hampshire also features in *The Painted Drum* (2005) as the place where a collection of artifacts from a North Dakota Ojibway reservation have been found as part of an estate. This novel brings together the two primary places in which Erdrich has lived, though in a 1993 interview, conducted whilst she was still living in New Hampshire, she confesses 'I've never stopped missing and loving the Great Plains although for the last eighteen years I've been east or west of their definition' (Chavkin 242).

The Crown of Columbus and *The Blue Jay's Dance* are rather exceptional in the choice of geographical settings because most of Erdrich's fiction is set in North Dakota, on an Indian reservation and the surrounding white towns of Argus, Hoopdance and Pluto, and the city of Fargo. Minneapolis, where Erdrich now lives permanently and runs an independent bookstore, Birchbark Books, also features in her fiction. The beginnings of Erdrich's extended series of North Dakota novels are to found in the short story 'The World's Greatest Fisherman', which was written in only a few days over Christmas 1981. Erdrich and Dorris recount, in a 1985 issue of Dartmouth Alumni Magazine, how Dorris' aunt had read a call for entries for the Nelson Algren Award for short fiction and sent them the notice only twelve days before the deadline. Despite the demands of holiday house guests and their children, Erdrich describes shutting herself in the kitchen and writing almost non-stop for two days, pausing to show drafts to Dorris who, having injured his back, was lying prone on the sitting room floor. The story won, bringing Erdrich to national attention and drawing her attention to the commonalities among 'The World's Greatest Fisherman' and stories she had published earlier, notably 'The Red Convertible' and 'Scales' (Chavkin and Chavkin 13-14). These

stories formed the core of her first novel, *Love Medicine*, which was the recipient of numerous awards and launched her reputation both nationally and internationally. *Love Medicine* was re-released in 1993 in a revised edition that added the following chapters: 'The Island', 'Resurrection', 'The Tomahawk Factory and 'Lyman's Luck'. These new chapters served to integrate the novel more closely into her expanding series of interconnected narratives, especially *The Bingo Palace* which was published in the following year, 1994.

The use of a common fictional geography that becomes more detailed and complex with each new novel introduced a significant innovation in Native American literature. While place and relationships with the land are important themes in American Indian writing, the writer most akin to Erdrich in this respect is William Faulkner and many critics have commented on the similarity between the two. Like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Erdrich's use of geography is fictionalized and cannot be related directly to real locations identified on maps. Indeed, only in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), the seventh novel in the series, is the reservation named as the eponymous Little No Horse. As Peter Beidler and Gay Barton have shown, the geographical spaces depicted in Erdrich's North Dakota novels are represented in deliberately misleading ways to discourage the eager reader from making too-simple identifications with real places.

If we consider Erdrich's North Dakota novels in their publication sequence, and in terms of her use of time and space, what emerges is a sense of the sprawling and immensely complex network of historical and geographical relationships she has created. Erdrich's fictional North Dakota landscape is first established in *Love Medicine*, a narrative encompassing the years 1898 to 1984, which is set primarily on an unnamed Ojibway reservation. The novel that followed, *The Beet Queen* (1986), surprised some reviewers by shifting the main setting to the off-reservation town of Argus to focus less on indigenous characters than the German settler community in the period 1932-1972, though the character of Fleur Pillager links the two narratives. Fleur is also the link to *Tracks* (1988), which returns to the reservation with some incidents set in Argus during 1912 to 1924. *The Bingo Palace* (1994), as Peter Beidler and Gay Barton point out, is set during an indeterminate year in the late twentieth century (perhaps the late 1980s or early 1990s) but the time frame of the novel is complicated by the use of memories and flashbacks (29); still, the setting is primarily the reservation where the story addresses, in part, the contentious contemporary issue of gambling on Native reservations. Fargo, North Dakota, is the primary setting of *Tales of Burning Love* (1996), with scenes set in Argus and on the reservation. In this novel the initial circumstances for Sister Leopolda's beatification, which is developed in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), are established; the novel is set in the mid-1990s but with recollections that take us back to the 1960s. *The Antelope Wife* (1998) is set in contemporary Minneapolis but includes accounts of eight generations of characters whose stories are told from the present-time year of 1945. *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* finally names the North Dakota reservation as Little No Horse and offers a story explaining its unusual name. Following Agnes De Witt's departure from Fargo, all of the primary action takes place at Little No Horse, though the novel returns to the broad historical sweep of earlier novels (here 1910 to 1997). *The Master Butchers Singing Club* (2003) returns to the immigrant characters Pete and Fritzie Kozka, introduced in *The Beet Queen* as living in Argus, and explores the interwar years between Europe and the US. *Four Souls* (2004) continues Fleur's story from her departure from the reservation in 1919 (explained in *Tracks*) and follows her to Minneapolis where she seeks revenge for the loss of her Pillager land. The novel ends with her return in 1933 and thus moves between Minneapolis and the reservation. The circumstances of Fleur's birth are revealed in *The Painted Drum*, which links through the characters of John Jewett Tatro and his grandfather, who was an Indian agent on the reservation, to *Four Souls*, *The Bingo Palace* and *Tracks*. When the older Tatro leaves the reservation, he takes with him looted Ojibway artifacts, thus bringing together North Dakota and New Hampshire settings; Faye's effort to return the drum to its rightful owners brings the action into the early twenty-first century. *The Plague of Doves* (2008) is linked to the previous novels not through characters but through place: the town of Pluto that is the primary setting was once part of tribal lands but now lies just outside the

reservation boundary. Through this sequence of novels, Erdrich has used her central geographical focus on North Dakota to create a complex skein of connections in time and space.

Indigenous Historical Contexts

Underlying Erdrich's concern with place and specifically with the indigenous lands that, historically, have become reservation lands, is awareness of the profound connections among land, family and *mino bimaadiziwin*, or the living of a good life. In her 2009 Dartmouth Commencement Address, she tells of working in the Baker Memorial Library in proximity to the mural *The Epic of American Civilization* by José Clemente Orozco. She offers a celebration of the knowledge that has been acquired by the graduating class:

> With this knowledge you have the makings of *mino bimaadiziwin*, in Ojibwe, the good life. Knowledge with Courage. Knowledge with Fortitude. Knowledge with Generosity and Kindness.
> This is *mino bimaadiziwin*.
> This concept of *mino bimaadiziwin* resonates with the message of Orozco's ferocious skeletons. It says knowledge without compassion is dead knowledge. Beware of knowledge without love.
> Now I don't mean romantic love – Harlequin Romance Love – I don't write those books. It is the kind of love you have: devotion to the world. (Web)

One of the major points of conflict between indigenous and Western worldviews—and a source of internal strife both for reservation families and communities—is the nature of the human relationship with the natural environment or 'devotion to the world'. In *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* Sister Hildegarde describes the colonizing view of the conflict over land, referring to tribal attitudes as doomed: 'They'll lose all the land, of course, being unused to the owning of land. Incredibly, it makes no sense to them. They avow, in their own peculiar way, that the earth is only on loan' (72). But the narrator expresses the view that is authorized and legitimated by the narrative itself: 'Into this complex situation walked Father Damien, with only the vaguest notion of how the ownership of land related to the soul' (76). He comes to understand, through the troubles of his parishioners, that the health of the soul—and of the body both individual and collective—depends upon a relationship with the natural environment that is the land, based upon the values of *mino bimaadiziwin*: essentially, courage, responsibility, respect, honesty and generosity. The core concern of Erdrich's writing is the problem of pursuing the way to the good life in the wake of colonialism.

The question that tears apart the reservation families, especially in Erdrich's early fiction--the Kashpaws, the Lamartines, the Pillagers and the Morrisseys—is how to respond to white encroachment upon tribal lands; how to deal with the land frauds, the broken treaties and the assault on tribal culture by the interests of the Catholic Church, on the one hand, and the commercial exploitation of reservation resources, on the other? The story of Fleur Pillager, which is one of the strongest threads linking the North Dakota novels (she is featured in *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen, Tracks*, *The Bingo Palace*, *Four Souls* and *The Painted Drum*) is a case in point. Fleur loses her claim to Pillager lands as a result of the economic demands made by the corrupt Indian agent, demands which force Margaret Kashpaw to choose between paying the taxes on Pillager or Kashpaw land. Thus, the action by the corrupt representative of the US government fractures family relationships and, with them, alliances within the tribal community. Bernadette Morrissey's role as secretary to the Indian agent raises suspicions that Morrissey lands will be immune from confiscation and this intensifies inter-tribal hostilities. Fleur's land is then violently cleared of timber by the Turcot Lumber Company and part of that timber is used to build the mansion in Minneapolis of John Mauser, the owner of the company. So Fleur leaves the reservation to pursue her revenge against Mauser, placing her daughter Lulu in a government boarding school. Thus, the original trauma of land loss and family severence is passed on to the following generation: Arwun

(John James Mauser II), the dysfunctional child born from Fleur's marriage to Mauser, and Lulu who endures the assault on tribal cultural identity that was the project of US Indian boarding schools.

Among the historical traumas experienced by Native American communities in the wake of colonization was the assimilative program of residential or boarding schools. One of Erdrich's early poems is 'Indian Boarding School: The Runaways', the subject of which is the efforts of children to cross the long distances that separate them from home. Boarding schools were deliberately placed far from reservations in order to prevent parental access to children and to discourage the children from running away. The poem describes the harsh sanctions meted out to returned runaways: corporal punishment and humiliating punitive tasks like scrubbing pavements—a humiliation recalled by Lulu Nanapush after she tried to run back to the reservation. In contrast to Lulu's experience, Nector Kashpaw is taken away to school but benefits from his western education so that upon his return to the reservation he becomes part of the tribal government and eventually chairman. He is able to travel to Washington to negotiate on behalf of the tribe, though his partially assimilated condition does create problems in his personal life. His brother Eli, however is hidden by his mother Margaret Rushes Bear who refuses to surrender both her sons to US government schooling and Eli is raised according to traditional lifeways. In *The Painted Drum*, Fleur's half-sister is said to have survived the Carlisle Indian School, which was established in Pennsylvania in 1879 as the first Native boarding school. The superintendent of Carlisle, Richard Pratt, is famous for his motto 'Kill the Indian and save the man'. By this he means that by removing Native children from all tribal influences and assimilating them completely to US culture, their 'humanity' could be protected from the presumed 'savagery' of indigenous lifeways. The strategies used to pursue this goal included brutal punishment for speaking tribal languages, the adoption of western styles of dress and food, and complete severance of relationships with family and clan groups. Children in schools such as Carlisle were required to perform hard manual labor to produce their own food, clothing and other necessities for the running of the school. This was the result of chronic underfunding of the schools, which also produced overcrowding and the periodic outbreak of devastating diseases such as tuberculosis. In *The Plague of Doves*, Evelina refers in passing to the 'Haskell Princess', evoking the Haskell Institute (now the Haskell Indian Nations University) which opened in 1884 in Lawrence, Kansas, as the United States Indian Industrial Training School. The fictional Haskell Princess is said to have died of tuberculosis, as did thousands of children who were living in cramped conditions that encouraged the spread of the disease. Haskell, like Carlisle and other Indian boarding schools, was an 'Industrial Training School' where children were educated to take up low-skilled positions in US society rather than for full assimilation. Indeed, the children received only basic formal instruction, spending much of their time in manual labor. Bruce Trigger and Wilcomb Washburn report that between 1880 and 1895 the US Office of Indian Affairs opened twenty off-reservation residential schools and reservation day schools (199).

As in her referencing of Indian boarding schools, Erdrich frequently alludes to actual events in the history of US-Indian relations: for example, the lynching that is central to *The Plague of Doves*; the US Cavalry offensives against Sioux villages upon which scenes in *The Antelope Wife* may be modeled (Beidler and Barton 40); the White Earth timber scandal in *Tracks*; references to the Wounded Knee Massacre in *The Master Butchers Singing Club* and, in that novel and *The Plague of Doves*, the *métis* rebel Louis Riel. These references make specific allusion to a general history of violent dispossession, physical and cultural genocide, and the continuing disenfranchisement of Native Americans that is an important context for Erdrich's fiction. Over the course of her three novels for young adults, *The Birchbark House* (1999), *The Game of Silence* (2005) and *The Porcupine Year* (2008), Erdrich recounts the story of the young Ojibway girl Omakayas and her family as they encounter the *chimookomanag* or white settlers for the first time. They find themselves dispossessed of both their traditional lands, as they are pressured to move west, and also the traditional lifeways that the land supported. Living on an island in Lake Superior, they build birchbark cabins surrounded by gardens in the summer, spend the autumn in ricing camps on the lake shore and, at the onset of winter, move to cedar log cabins near the town of

LaPointe. These historical novels, set in the mid-nineteenth century represent, through the particular case of Omakayas, many of the historical experiences of Native Americans generally.

Depopulation as the result of warfare and massacres, and disease--especially smallpox, measles and tuberculosis—reduced the Native population from an estimated 50 to 100 million (Stannard 151) at the end of the fifteenth century to approximately 2 million today (Utter 17, 23). It should be noted, however, that the Native American population is one of the fastest growing 'ethnic' groups in the contemporary US. From the immediate post-contact period of the late 1400s, the effect of missionary activity has been a sustained loss of traditional religions. It was in 1978 with the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act that Native peoples were finally able to practice their tribal religions free of persecution. After the American War of Independence, the era of treaty-making began; this was a necessity because although Britain had ceded its colonial holdings to the US, agreement had not been sought from the indigenous peoples living on those lands. However, the breaking or abrogation of those treaties has resulted in the systematic loss of tribal lands to white settlers. The appropriation of land for US settlement accelerated during the Removal era, following Congressional passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830. Entire tribal communities were forcibly relocated to lands west of the Mississippi River: the Cherokee in the Trail of Tears of the 1830s; the 1862 removal of Dakota and Lakota; and the 1864 Navajo Long Walk, are among the best-known of these deportations. Native opposition to the taking of their lands dates from first contact. But conflict with the US intensified during the Removal era (the Creek War of 1813-14, the Black Hawk War of 1831-32, the Seminole Wars of 1817-18, 1835-42 and 1855-58) and particularly after the Civil War when a highly militarized US government turned its attention to the Plains Indians of the West. The so-called Indian Wars included the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre, the Modoc War of 1872-73, the Red River Indian War of 1874-75, the 1876 Battle of the Little Big Horn, the Nez Perce War of 1877 and the 1890 Massacre at Wounded Knee. The slaughter of bison to the point of extinction, during the 1880s, supported the war effort by depriving tribes of food and material for clothing, housing and utensils. However, the single most devastating strategy for the appropriation of Native lands was the Dawes Act or General Allotment Act of 1887. By this Act, Congress authorized the division of reservation land into individual allotments to be given to qualified individuals. In order to qualify, tribal members had to submit to the test of blood quantum, proving that they were 'Indian', before receiving an allotment. This restriction, together with the small parcels of land that were allotted, resulted in a land 'surplus' that was sold to white settlers. Trigger and Washburn state, 'When a final accounting was made in the 1930s, government officials estimated that the Dawes Act had brought about the loss of over 90,000,000 acres ... of Indian-owned land' (210).

The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 ended the practice of allotment and also instituted a series of measures that recognized the sovereign status of tribal nations. This policy was reversed in the two decades following the late 1940s through the actions of Congress and the Senate Subcommittee on Indian Affairs, ushering in the 'Termination' period which lasted until the early 1960s. During this period, the BIA assembled a list of tribes with whom the federal government could sever treaty relations, remove the sovereign status of tribes and 'terminate' the federal recognition of tribal status along with guaranteed treaty rights and payments, and protection of reservation lands. The Menominee and Klamath were 'terminated' in this fashion but the poverty and social problems that ensued inspired vigorous opposition among other tribes marked for termination and an eventual abandonment of the policy. Federal efforts to force Native assimilation through the BIA continued in the mid-twentieth century with the Indian Relocation Act (1956) which encouraged Native people to leave reservations and move to government-designated urban centers--such as Minneapolis, Chicago, Los Angeles, Denver, Dallas, San Francisco, Oklahoma City and Cleveland—by promising vocational training and resettlement assistance.

The legacy of this history in the contemporary US is poverty-stricken reservations with very high levels of unemployment resulting in increased violence, alcoholism, family dysfunction, substance misuse, poor schooling and government dependence. This dependence was encouraged by US policies that empowered the federal government to act as 'trustee' to the Native holders of

allotted lands particularly in regards to the financial proceeds from the exploitation of their resources: specifically, coal, timber, grazing, gas and oil leases. The recently settled *Cobell v Salazar* case drew public attention to more than one hundred years of mismanagement and theft of Native Trust money managed by the BIA. Under the terms of allotment, the federal government was responsible for providing regular accounting of trust funds and payment of those funds to trustees. The plaintiffs requested $40 billion in restitution and in 2008 were awarded $455.6 million; the 2009 result of the appeal against this decision resulted in a settlement that comprised a $1.412 billion Accounting/Trust Administration Fund, a $2 billion Trust Land Consolidation Fund and an Indian Education Scholarship fund of up to $60 million. Widespread tribal poverty is also responsible for the increasing use of reservations for the disposal of commercial and toxic waste materials as a source of scarce revenue.[1] This history of colonial oppression, dispossession and cultural assault forms the wider context to Erdrich's work and is taken up in various ways in the chapters that follow.

Ojibway Contexts

The genocidal history of US-Native relations is the source of what Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor refers to as 'tragic wisdom' (*Postindian* 38): Native knowledge of the duplicity of western languages, the damaging impact of stereotypes (such as the noble or doomed Indian), and the destructive nature of western colonial views of the land. According to Vizenor, this history does not necessarily make of Native people tragic victims but can be generative of positive knowledge, especially the knowledge born of what he calls 'survivance'. Survivance is more than simple physical survival and resistance; survivance is the continuation through time of a tribal view of the world. Survivance is a way of seeing the world and is also an understanding of what the world is and of what it is composed (Vizenor 'Survivance'). Erdrich's exploration of the possibilities for *mino bimaadiziwin*, or the living of a good life, in the contemporary US is strongly informed by the concept of Native survivance.

This survivance worldview is perhaps nowhere more evident than in her use of Ojibway ontology: an understanding of the world in which different forms of creation are co-existent and valued equally. This can be seen, for example, in her treatment of human-animal interactions: in *The Antelope Wife* some incidents are narrated by dogs, characters are featured with animal ancestry and Blue Prairie Woman, for instance, marries a stag. Most surprisingly—and disturbingly from a western ontological perspective--the incidents in which a soldier suckles a baby are echoed by Blue Prairie Woman suckling a puppy. In an Ojiway ontology, there is no hierarchical separation of human and non-human creation but rather the two are continuous with each other and so are of the same ontological status. This extends to inanimate objects like the eponymous drum that saves the children in *The Painted Drum*, as well as Shamengwa's violin and the also stones that are sentient in *The Plague of Doves*. Sentient stones carry a particular cultural resonance in Ojibway mythology because the brother of the tribal trickster figure, Nanaaboozho, is a stone. The epigraph to *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, attributed to Nanapush, makes the claim that every part of creation is a 'relation' and is in relationship with every other part: '*In saying the word nindinawemaganidok, or my relatives, we speak of everything that has existed in time, the known and the unknown, the unseen, the obvious, all that lived before or is living now in the worlds above and below*' (n.p. italics in original). Thus, the representation of a world in which all elements of creation are related to each other is a survivance strategy, a powerful assertion that despite centuries of colonial violence and tribal loss, Ojibway culture still flourishes.

Erdrich uses several Ojibway cultural figures, including Nanaabozo the trickster, the evil Gambler and the *Windigo*. In some stories the Gambler and the windigo are the same character. The trickster appears in Ojibway origins stories, such as the earthdiver myth in which the world is created anew as Turtle Island following a flood, as well as a range of contemporary narratives. The tricker is a joker, a character who deflates and exposes the pretensions of others but who sometimes is humiliated himself by his foolish actions. However, he is primarily a creative character. In Erdrich's fiction, memory, language and storytelling traditions all contribute to the personal and

historical recollections that structure the characters' distinctive identities and worldviews. The word represents both knowledge and experience (survivance and tragic wisdom), and so language becomes the medium of recreation, shaping the new from the old. In this respect, all of Erdrich's very diverse narrators could be said to perform the trickster's world-making function. Even more, it could be argued that the author who creates these often unreliable narratives is herself the supreme trickster in her fictional world. In contrast to Nanaabozo, the Gambler and the Windigo are world-destroyers: the Gambler tempts his victims to venture their lives in a game of chance and, when they lose, he turns them over to the windigo, a cannibalistic monster that possesses considerable spiritual power. In a number of stories, Nanaabozo takes on the Gambler and defeats him through his cunning and quick wit.

Erdrich interweaves tribal Ojibway cultural elements with the history of US-Native relations in her negotiation of the complexities of contemporary *mino bimaadiziwin*. In other words, her core theme is the challenge of self-definition within the context of Native American history and pressures applied by such institutions as tribe, family, Church, police and BIA. In Erdrich's fiction the past merges with the present within the context of continuing traditions as her characters seek modern identities through the interplay of past and present social realities. A vexed aspect of identity construction is the question of home and belonging within the context of dispossession. Characters experience a conflict between the desire to leave and a longing for home, a conflict related to their concern with tribal origins, on the one hand, and their marginality or otherness in the 'whitestream' (as John Gamber terms the 'mainstream' in his chapter), on the other. Within this context, the importance of family cannot be overestimated. Family relationships are at the heart of tribal and kinship structures despite the fact that families are displaced and broken as the consequence of poverty, alcoholism, promiscuity and illegitimacy, violence, and self-hatred that is directed towards children and spouses. The historical violence done to tribal unity is represented through broken and dysfunctional families. Violence is now domestic; hunting is now done by the police. But family reveals how enmeshed are the personal and the political in Native American life.

The stories of these families and the individuals who comprise them are most often told by unreliable first-person narrators who speak from inside the community. No authority or central narrative consciousness is invoked to order the characters' lives; rather, the multivocality of Erdrich's fiction resists the notion that truth and authority can exist as fixed absolutes. In this way, and by refusing to judge her characters, Erdrich's narratives incorporate and interweave both personal and also historical/political factors. This polyphonic storytelling technique supports Erdrich's cyclical style of narration: each novel tells of characters who already exist in Erdrich's larger fictional world; they are not invented new for each story. As a consequence, the reader is encouraged to think of the characters as possessing a reality or ontology that is independent of particular narratives. The novels give voice to a plurality of characters, each telling parts of the larger story from different points of view. The dominant voice, however, is that of the community. Erdrich's storytelling is concerned with the community as it deals with the problems and issues that occur. This focus upon the tribal community, past and present, supports Erdrich's aesthetics of survivance as does her cyclical use of time, which resists Western linear or chronological time. In an Ojibway perspective the past is integrated into the present where it continues to live and to shape the living of contemporary lives. Thus, both her temporal and spatial settings are predominantly tribal; in a 1985 interview with Laura Coltelli, together with Michael Dorris they explained the conscious decision to locate her novels within a tribal community where the outside world (such as Washington DC, which Nector as tribal chairman visits on tribal business) is neither very present nor very relevant to the lives of the characters (Chavkin 24). The fictional world is encompassed by the community and the primary interest of the narratives is focused upon how the community deals with itself and its members, and their search for a way to live an Ojibway 'good life'.

Conclusion

Erdrich sees herself as primarily a storyteller and, in interviews, has described her early experiences of listening to relatives tell stories, especially her paternal grandfather Patrick Gourneau who was

the tribal chair of the Turtle Mountain Reservation while she was growing up. 'Sitting around listening to our family tell stories has been a more important influence on our work than literary influences in some ways', she tells Hertha Wong. 'These you absorb as a child when your senses are most open, when your mind is forming. That really happened, I know, in our family' (Chavkin 38). The tribal influences upon Erdrich's writing include her narrative techniques as well as her core themes. She brings into contemporary North American fiction the enduring indigenous presence of a tribal culture that endures through survivance and flourishes through *mino bimaadiziwin*.

NOTES

1. This overview of US-Native history originally appeared in Connie Jacobs' chapter but for reasons of space has been moved to this Introduction. I am grateful to her for the historical outline of these events.

WORKS CITED

All references are to be found in the final print version of this article.