

# Magical Resistance: Louise Erdrich's Use of Magic Realism in *Tracks* and *The Plague of Doves*

Caleb Tankersley  
The University of Southern Mississippi

Louise Erdrich is one of the most celebrated American writers of the last thirty years, recognized for her imagistic sentences, fragmented storytelling, and her ambiguous use of magic. While magical realism is not directly applied to her novels, the *Paris Review* describes Erdrich as having “flirtations” with the technique.<sup>1</sup> Magical realism is also never mentioned in David Stirrup’s collection of critical essays on Erdrich’s work; Stirrup instead aligns Erdrich’s use of the supernatural with the ancient religion of her Ojibwe heritage (67). Allan Chavkin and Alan Velie make similar claims regarding fantastical elements in Erdrich’s writing, avoiding the designation magical realism while attaching the supernatural to a nebulous conception of Native American religious tradition.<sup>2</sup> Almost all of Erdrich’s writing indeed concerns the complexities of reservation life in the twentieth century, but how Native themes and magic intersect remains unexplained by critics who assume a connection.

Drawing a parallel between magic and Indigenous beliefs may seem like a minor leap, but there’s a prejudicial danger in the assumption. Asserting Erdrich’s magic emerges from her Ojibwe heritage removes her work from the magical realist tradition. Rather than interacting with global literature, Erdrich is perceived as speaking to a small niche of readers. Conflating the supernatural and Native American beliefs also fails to consider *how* the supernatural is utilized in Erdrich’s fiction. Considering the twenty-year span between her 1988 novel *Tracks* and the 2008 Pulitzer-prize finalist *The Plague of Doves*, a clear trajectory emerges in which Erdrich’s magical realism transcends a simplistic relationship with her Native ancestry. A careful analysis of *Tracks* and *The Plague of Doves* reveals that Erdrich employs magical realism in a fashion similar to other magical realists: The supernatural is used as a form of resistance to colonialism and colonial worldviews.<sup>3</sup> Rather than portraying Nativeness through magic, Erdrich uses her

---

<sup>1</sup>Erdrich herself has refused to confirm such claims about her work. When asked if she “thinks twice about writing” the supernatural into her novels, Erdrich coyly responds with, “I’m not aware of the supernatural in the same way, so I can’t tell when it starts to approach” (Erdrich, interviewed by Halliday).

<sup>2</sup>Chavkin claims Erdrich’s use of “the magical realism of the postmodernists probably has its origin in Erdrich’s Chippewa heritage” (2). Velie takes a more definitive stance by directly stating that Erdrich’s use of magical realism is meant to “demonstrate the nature of reality as perceived by Indians, in this case the Chippewa” (61). Velie is wise to qualify his perceived “nature of reality” as Chippewa, as there are numerous tribal outlooks and worldviews. However, Velie does make a connection between understanding an Indian worldview and the supernatural.

<sup>3</sup>The dichotomy between strictly realist and magical realist writing can be interpreted as relying on a Western viewpoint that “assumes that magic and the irrational belong to indigenous and non-European cultures, whereas

magical realism to both defend and mourn for her culture; through the progression of time—both in the narratives and in Erdrich as a writer—this magical resistance morphs into a future-focused vision of tribal rebirth and a new Native identity that can retain a sense of the supernatural in the post-colonial world.

### **Erdrich and the Magical Realist Tradition**

Louise Erdrich's work fits into the magical realism<sup>4</sup> tradition by employing supernatural elements in her fiction but also by instilling a sense of the unreal in her language. Wendy Faris states that magical realism must combine "realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed" (163). Erdrich achieves this organic quality not by proliferating her works with magical events but by instilling the language itself throughout her novels with a sense of the fantastic. The supernatural therefore emerges from Erdrich's techniques and skills as a writer rather than from her Ojibwe heritage. The view that magical realism originates from a deep connection to culture is foundational for some magical realist critics, especially when considering how magical realism has evolved in the Americas. Alejo Carpentier introduced his concept of the marvelous real, a subset of magical realism that comes exclusively from the American continent due to the mixture of cultures, or *mestizaje*. Emerging from this mixture is a "wealth of mythologies" that creates a feeling of the marvelous in the everyday landscapes and cultures of the Americas (88). Under this definition, Erdrich's work would be included with other magical realists, but only under the merits of her cultural mixture and heritage as opposed to her fiction.<sup>5</sup> While they may align with Erdrich's critics from the opening paragraph, Carpentier's views are insufficient when discussing Erdrich's writing as literature that speaks to but is not of her culture.

Maggie Ann Bowers argues for a more specific definition of magical realism, one that seemingly excludes Erdrich's writing. Her influential text *Magic(al) Realism* constructs a paradigm in which magical texts that fall outside her definition are re-categorized (either magic realism, marvelous real, or the fantastic), yet she clearly privileges magical realism as the preferred genre for study and recognition. Bowers

---

rationality and a true sense of reality belong to the European perspective" (Bowers 84). This conception is problematic in terms of race and other factors, but there is truth in perceiving writers as using magical realist techniques to assert their own cultures "in the face of domination by European American culture" (Bowers 85). Magical realism is meant not to proselytize a native worldview, but to counter a European one.

<sup>4</sup>The designation "magical realism" originated in 1925 from the German art critic Franz Roh, who originally used the term to describe a post-expressionist trend among paintings that "constitute a magical gaze opening onto a piece of mildly transfigured 'reality'" (20). Roh's work influenced Jorge Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, all of whom took the concepts of magical realism and evolved them into a literary technique that spread throughout the world during the twentieth century.

<sup>5</sup>Angel Flores, Luis Leal, and Amaryll Chanady have debated Carpentier's claim that the marvelous emanates from a cultural mixture exclusive to the Americas. Flores in particular argues against Carpentier by purporting that magical realism was exported from Europeans such as Roh and Franz Kafka. The debate over origins of the supernatural in magical realist writing is interesting, but it's ultimately counterproductive as it considers the cultural factors over the writing as literature. We will only understand Louise Erdrich's magical realism by focusing in on the text itself.

argues that to be truly magical realist the fantastical elements must be embedded in and accepted as “part of everyday reality throughout the text” (27). If the supernatural elements of the narrative are questioned or uncertain in any way, then that text cannot be labeled magical realist. The *Paris Review*’s assertion that Erdrich is “flirting” with magical realism appears like an accusation under this light, as if the ambiguous manner of her magical realism calls into question her use of and commitment to the technique.<sup>6</sup> This qualifier of Bowers—that magic must be accepted as part of everyday reality—carries several difficulties.<sup>7</sup> One problem in requiring “unquestioned” magic is that characters often challenge even realistic elements in fiction. In Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of this World*, the reader is shown two versions of the end of Macandal’s story, one in which he is saved and another in which he is burned alive (45, 46). Macandal’s fate is left ambiguous, and thus under Bower’s definition Carpentier’s novel would not fall under magical realist tradition. While Carpentier’s creative work may have a questionable placement regardless, even the most seminal text of magical realism is not without ambiguity. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Jose Arcadio Segundo is the only witness to a massacre perpetrated by the banana company. Other characters question whether Jose Arcadio actually witnesses the massacre (Marquez 308). There is some indication that Jose Arcadio did in fact witness the massacre, but the text is not definitively clear, which—under Bowers’ paradigm—brings the event itself into question. With such a stringent definition even the most foundational text would be excommunicated from the magical realist canon. In the spirit of the magical realist texts in which the world itself is more pliable, a definition of magical realism must be flexible in understanding a variety of supernatural manifestations and techniques. Compared to the whole of Marquez’s novel, the ambiguity of a few supernatural elements does not upset the overall label of magical realism. The same can be said for the writing of Louise Erdrich.

While Erdrich’s novels may contain fewer fantastical events than other magical realist texts—and while those occurrences may be punctuated as questions—other elements of Erdrich’s writing solidify her work as powerfully magical realist. Bowers makes another strong qualification on the magical realist label that resonates with Erdrich’s work: “The key to understanding how magical realism works is to understand the way in which the narrative is constructed in order to provide a realistic context for the magical events of the fiction. Magical realism therefore relies upon realism but only so that it can stretch what is acceptable as real to its limits” (22). For a work to be truly

---

<sup>6</sup>Chavkin, Stirrup, and Velie also seemingly have difficulty labeling Erdrich’s use of the supernatural as decidedly magical realist, even when they conform to Carpentier’s view and attach the supernatural in her work to Indigenous cultures.

<sup>7</sup>In order to solidify her claim, Bowers discusses Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” and illustrates how Gregor Samsa’s reluctance to deal with his condition—being transformed “into a monstrous vermin”—betrays a questioning of the incident (7). Furthermore, the shock of Gregor’s family at their predicament indicates that being turned into a giant insect is not a part of reality in the story and therefore Kafka’s work is tossed out of the magical realist canon (Bowers 26, 27). But there are many holes in Bower’s argument here. Whether Gregor Samsa accepts, believes, or questions his circumstances and to what degree is a highly subjective notion. The turning of a few words could make all the difference. As there are a variety of English translations of Kafka’s famous story, no doubt Bowers would categorize each version differently based on a chance decision by the translator.

magical realism, the magic must in some sense undermine the real. The reality of the text cannot be questioned solely by a few isolated fantastical events; rather, the magic must be a part of the whole narrative, intrinsic to its construction so that realism is chipped at throughout the work. This speaks to the oxymoronic quality of the genre and to how the two opposing concepts—the magic and the real—must be balanced throughout the text.<sup>8</sup> Erdrich’s shaping of the real around the magical is what firmly settles her work as magical realist, which she achieves less through supernatural events than by the marvelous quality of her prose.

Much has been made of Erdrich’s unique writing style and narrative voice that creates this effect of magic eroding the real. Stirrup refers to the “fluidity of Erdrich’s lyrical prose” as a means of rejecting “critical determinism” (91).<sup>9</sup> Erdrich’s flowing sentences are heavy with metaphor and perform much of the work in eroding the realism in her novels. Before any supernatural events are brought into the text, the reader is kept off balance by a prose style that muddles the edges of reality in the text. There is a subtle trick Erdrich plays as she lures readers in by establishing a solid, realistic world before dismantling it, creating an off-balanced sense of magical and the real mixing into one. While Erdrich does ground her writing in realism in the beginning of her novels, the narrative evolves into a stream of gorgeous metaphors. As David Treuer notes,<sup>10</sup> the opening section of *Love Medicine* is anything but lyrical in style, describing June Kashpaw’s flirtation and disappointing sexual encounter with a North Dakota oil worker. The writing is simple and even minimalist in sections, reading like a hard-boiled detective novel: “He looked familiar, like a lot of people looked familiar to her. She had seen so many come and go. He hooked his arm, inviting her to enter, and she did so without hesitation” (Erdrich1). The sentences are short, declarative, and unquestionably confirm the reality of the text. Many of Erdrich’s novels begin with a similar writing style, including *The Plague of Doves*, which opens on the scene of a brutal murder. In this beginning chapter the phrases are flat and without image while the verbs are stark and simple: “the gun jammed,” “the baby stood,” “the man sat down” (1). These sentences have more in common with Hemingway than with any magical realist writing. This cut-and-dry style serves as establishing the real. Rather than begin with fantastical elements, Erdrich opens with realism in order to later subvert it. The writing style evolves in a conscious structure that lulls the reader into a feeling of realism. By the end of the first section of *Love Medicine*—as June Kashpaw attempts to walk home in a snow storm—the melodic nature of Erdrich’s tone is revealed: “Her feet grew numb, but she did not worry about the distance. . . . Even when her heart clenched and her skin turned crackling cold it didn’t matter, because the pure and naked part of her went on” (7). This style seems so removed from the earlier quoted section as to be from a different writer.

---

<sup>8</sup>Bowers describes this further as the eroding of “the distinction between what is magical and what is real” (67).

<sup>9</sup>In writing about *Love Medicine*, David Treuer describes Erdrich’s writing style as using “a mixture of fact and fancy, a mixture of the figure and the figurative” (43).

<sup>10</sup>Treuer’s essay “Smartberries” is an excellent analysis of how and how not to interpret Erdrich’s first novel and prose style. In the essay, Treuer describes the bleak opening to *Love Medicine*, which he relates to the style of Steinbeck: “Nothing onstage is extreme or fantastic, just quietly desperate” (41, 42).

The event (June's death) is made translucent by the metaphorical language. Erdrich lures the reader into reality before undermining it with the fantastic. It is Erdrich's language that performs most of this work in fulfilling Bowers' stipulation that the text dissolve the divide between what is real and what is magical. While other writers also employ metaphorical language, Louise Erdrich's style saturates her novels to such a degree that the reader is not fazed when a supernatural event occurs. Her opening strategy and figurative prose "stretch what is acceptable as real," firmly situating Erdrich within the magical realist tradition.

Another hallmark of magical realism in Bowers' definition concerns the subversive bent of many magical realist works. Whether overt or hidden, most of the major novels of magical realism contain a dimension of political resistance. The genre's "transgressive and subversive qualities" often associate magical realism with post-colonialism, feminism, and writers of color (Bowers 66). Bowers suggests this predilection is due to the inherent boundary-breaking of the genre, the magical and the real being "brought into question by their juxtaposition" (67). Erdrich's prose certainly questions the boundaries of the supernatural and the real by juxtaposing the two, but Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris establish a more political dimension to the subversive strain in magical realist writing. In their introduction to the critical collection *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Faris and Zamora ambitiously pronounce magical realism as "resist[ing] the basic assumptions of post-enlightenment rationalism and literary realism"(6). Combining fantastical elements in realistic narratives calls into question that reality, and thus the reader is encouraged to question other concepts held as unassailably "rational."<sup>11</sup> Bowers clarifies that writers in a post-colonial context often use magical realism to "challenge the dominant culture's authority" (85). Bowers attempts to use this notion of post-colonial resistance as another box to check when registering a writer as magical realist. While her works are not as overtly political as other texts, Erdrich's novels are rife with subtle instances of resistance to colonial powers and a calling into question of the rational thinking of the dominant culture. Bowers may be correct in asserting that—intentional or not—subversion is inherent to the genre.

Bower's notion of magical realism as political resistance to colonialism/rationalism clashes with a number of critical interpretations on Erdrich's writing. She has been chastised for what David Stirrup calls "a political engagement that [Leslie Marmon Silko and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn] find lacking" (28). Stirrup goes on to discuss Silko's famous review of Erdrich's *The Beet Queen* in which Silko blasts Erdrich for choosing post-modern stylistic flourishes over real-world political themes, writing that *The Beet Queen* has "an ethereal clarity and shimmering beauty because no history or politics intrudes to muddy the well of pure necessity contained within the language itself" (10).

---

<sup>11</sup>Incorporating magical elements into the reality of the text can be viewed as legitimizing a worldview counter to Western realism and to colonial European philosophies by constituting "an assault of the basic structures of rationalism"(6). While there's a problematic consequence in tying rationalism with Western colonialism, the connection does serve the political aims of magical realist writers in subverting colonial worldviews; however, the focus should not be on the assertion of a Native worldview but on the use of magical realism as resistance to colonial rationalism.

Erdrich was accused of rejecting the subversive qualities Bowers, Faris, and Zamora insist are essential to magical realist writing. Silko has since softened her tone on Erdrich's writing, but the criticism has followed Erdrich for several decades. While Silko's appraisal is somewhat understandable from the vantage of Erdrich's first two novels alone, the wider tapestry of her connected works suggest a subtle but strong political component that aligns her with other writers that combine a post-colonial perspective with magical realism as a resistance to Euro-colonial rationalism.

Erdrich's use of magic to subvert a Western, realist worldview is shared by fellow magical realist Ben Okri, specifically in his Booker-prize winning *The Famished Road*. The main character in Okri's novel is Azaro, an abiku—or spirit child—caught between the physical and spiritual world. Azaro is constantly being lured by the dead spirit children, who beg him to die and join them in a paradisiacal afterlife. By remaining in the world of the living, Azaro subjects himself to visions of spirits that are beautiful and horrific. The language of Okri's writing is much like Erdrich's in that the style itself corrodes the reader's understanding of what is real and what is magic. Okri describes this writing style as a “dream-logic narrative,” through which the reader is defamiliarized and the magical realist elements introduced. This style mirrors Erdrich's not only in form, but also in resistance (Sethi). Beyond the plot events of Okri or Erdrich's texts—which are politically subversive in and of themselves<sup>12</sup>—the “dream-logic” style is used to subvert the colonial narrative and depiction of Okri and Erdrich's respective cultures. Matthew J.A. Green explains that Okri's use of a fluid, metaphorical prose techniques “draws attention to the dream-like aspects of reality itself. In this manner it resists the processes of abstraction central within dominant strands of enlightenment thought” (24). Okri's resistance to colonialism lies as much in his writing style—in the inherent subversion of combining the fantastic with the real—as it does in the political conflicts of *The Famished Road*'s plot. Erdrich's lyrical, metaphorical writing style—what Silko calls “poet's prose”—is its own form of subversion to realism. Despite the subtlety of the political messages in her novels, Erdrich's metaphorical prose undermines and casts off the confines of Western rationalism. In this sense, her work clearly belongs in the magical realist tradition alongside other influential texts that resist a colonial worldview.

### Magical Realism as Resistance

If Leslie Marmon Silko had only waited, her political concerns over a lack of resistance in Erdrich's novels would have been assuaged by the publication of Erdrich's third book. *Tracks*—released two years after *The Beet Queen*—is Erdrich's novel most heavily identified with magical realism. Thus the resistance to colonialism dwells more

---

<sup>12</sup>*The Famished Road* contains a strong subplot regarding political parties and machinations. *Tracks* is concerned with tribal land laws and the unfair bureaucracies surrounding tribal property. The driving event behind *The Plague of Doves* is the lynching of an innocent group of Indians. That any of these texts are politically subversive is beyond dispute, but these plot elements are not intrinsically tied to the use of magic in the text. The magical elements and prose styles are performing a different form of subversion, calling into question rational thinking at a more fundamental level, as opposed to the specific political contexts of the novels' plots. These two subversive elements run parallel to each other in the texts but are performing separate work.

on the surface of the narrative, not only through the plot but through the use of magic, which are integrally linked in this text. *Tracks* has two dueling narrators who switch back and forth over the course of the novel, both of whom are regular Erdrich characters. The first is Nanapush, the old trickster figure in *Love Medicine*, *Four Loves*, and other Erdrich texts. With the possible exception of Fleur, Nanapush is the character more aligned with Ojibwe traditional belief and practices, which in this text are sometimes associated with magic.<sup>13</sup> The other narrator is Pauline—known in other novels as Sister Leopolda—a delusional, religious masochist, who illustrates Indigenous peoples taking on the colonial worldview. Susan Stanford Friedman positions the two characters as philosophical foils in which Nanapush “represents resistance to Euro-American culture” and Pauline “represents the colonized subject” (112). The struggle between the two character’s worldviews centers on Fleur Pillager, the main character of *Tracks*. Like Nanapush, Fleur is affiliated with Anishinaabe practices, and thus with magic. It’s from Fleur that most of the novel’s magical realism emanates. In the novel’s second chapter, Pauline describes the multiple drownings that Fleur has miraculously survived. Pauline and the rest of the reservation community attribute this to Misshepesu, “the water man, the monster” who is described as “love hungry with desire and maddened for the touch of young girls, the strong and daring especially, the ones like Fleur” (11). Fleur is said to hold great power by having “got herself into some half-forgotten medicine” (12). In this way Fleur and Nanapush are connected to the same sense of power in their Anishinaabe heritage. The two are very close, as Nanapush saved Fleur as a child. Eli Kashpaw approached Nanapush in order to procure love medicine, so the reader knows both Nanapush and Fleur are followers of ancient Anishinaabe beliefs (45). Time and again these beliefs are tested against Pauline’s devout and colonial Catholicism. And for much of the novel the supernaturals act as a shield against Pauline and other Native characters who have bought in to the government land deal and thus are aligned with colonialism. In one incident, Boy Lazarre kidnaps and then shames Margaret Kashpaw by shaving her head, though in the process Margaret manages to bite Boy Lazarre’s hand. Fleur uses her magic to exact revenge on Boy, ultimately killing him through Margaret’s bite: “He showed his hand, the bite that Margaret had dealt him, and the dark streak from the wound, along his wrist and inching up his arm” (120). Throughout the novel, Fleur uses her magic to overcome colonial influences. However, this reading leads to a simplistic view of Erdrich’s novel and of her use of magic in which Anishinaabe spiritual practices are portrayed as good and colonial Catholicism is bad. The resistance to Western rationalism is too easy from this vantage. Erdrich’s lens is decidedly more nuanced and complex.

Erdrich’s use of magic and Anishinaabe beliefs in *Tracks* adds to the subversive element, but the true resistance exists outside of the supernatural in the text. While Pauline loses several small contests in the novel, Fleur’s magic does eventually falter and fade away. As the make-shift family at Fleur’s cabin starves to death over the winter,

---

<sup>13</sup>Nanapush is connected to Nanabozho, the “culture hero” of Anishinaabe folklore and belief (Stirrup 123). *Tracks* is the novel most clearly connected to Ojibwe beliefs, including the use of Misshepesu. However, the magic in the novel is not solely connected to these beliefs, and other Erdrich novels—including *The Plague of Doves*—employ supernatural elements with no origin in Native views. Erdrich’s use of Anishinaabe culture in a few instances does not reflect on her use of magic throughout all of her works.

Fleur has a vision of a deer and tells Eli where to find it. The family is excited to be saved from possible death, but Eli returns empty-handed, and more than just the deer is lost (170-71). Fleur's magic fails the family, who are eventually forced to sign a government contract in order to survive (172). If Erdrich employed magical realism to promote her native spiritual beliefs and worldviews, then *Tracks* would have ended much differently. Fleur loses her land and her connection to the supernatural, portraying the failure of her magic. Nanapush also succumbs to the same defeat, relinquishing his land and accepting new ways. The novel is not a celebratory example of the triumph of Native beliefs, but is rather an illustration of their last, dying days. In the novel's opening Nanapush explains to Lulu how much of Anishinaabe land, life, and culture has already wasted away: "I saw the passing of times you will never know. I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a pelt of more than two years' growth" (2). The novel begins with a culture already on the very brink of extinction. By the end of *Tracks*, the last vestiges of the Chippewa way of life—which were upheld by Fleur's magic—have disappeared: "Fleur had not saved us with her dream, and it now seemed what was happening was so ordinary that it fell beyond her abilities. She had failed too many times . . . Her dreams lied, her vision obscured, her helper slept deep in the lake" (177). By the novel's end, Fleur has failed, and the land around Lake Matchimanito disappears under government treaties. Magical realism is being used in *Tracks* as a form of resistance, but Erdrich is not advocating for these supernatural elements as a replacement to colonialism. The magic is not the source of resistance in *Tracks*. Rather, the magic fades as a demonstration of its ineffectiveness in a swiftly evolving world.

The magic of *The Plague of Doves* functions very differently than that of *Tracks* in its sense of subversion. Though the novels were published twenty years apart, the distinction has to do with the differences in time within the narratives. While *Tracks* is confined to the early twentieth century, *The Plague of Doves* leaps through a wide variety of narrators and decades. While Erdrich's writing style continues to permeate the feeling of magical realism and resistance by undermining realism throughout the text, the fantastical elements are far fewer in occurrence, are more subtle, and are less connected to Anishinaabe culture in this novel. The majority of magical events are set in the past, closer to the timeline of *Tracks*. The actual plague of doves is the first fantastical element the reader encounters. The doves are described as being ludicrously numerous to the point that "one could wring the necks of hundreds or thousands and effect no visible diminishment of their number. . . . Each morning when the people woke it was to the scraping and beating of wings, the murmurous susurrations, the awful cooing babble, and the sight . . . of the curious and gentle faces of those creatures" (5, 6). The number of doves are almost beyond imagining, but whether this constitutes an instance of magical realism is open to interpretation. Erdrich does not appear to intend such a reading, as she admitted in an interview that the idea of the doves emerges from a true story.<sup>14</sup> However, Erdrich's lyrical prose goes a long way in convincing the reader that he or she is witnessing a fantastical event through the focus on sound ("scraping and beating,"

---

<sup>14</sup>In an interview with NPR's *Weekend Edition*, Erdrich was again coy about her use of magic, shying away from admitting to fantastical elements or magical realism. This should not be incorporated into the reader's idea as to whether Erdrich is magical realist, as many other magical realist writers have balked at the label. The magical realist techniques of Erdrich's writing speak for themselves.

“cooing babble”) and the anthropomorphic description of the birds. More importantly, the magic here is notably detached from Native cultural beliefs. Fantastical elements simply exists in this novel, which illustrates even more the loss and failing of ancient Indigenous beliefs, be they Métis or Anishinaabe. Another instance of magical realism occurs in Shamengwa’s story as to how he found his violin: “The dream was simple. A voice. *Go to the lake and sit by the southern rock. Wait there. I will come*” (205). There’s little context to the dream, but as it took place during Shamengwa’s youth, the reader knows the magical dream also occurred around the same time period as *Tracks*, a far more magical point in the history of Erdrich’s universe. Three days after following the commands of his dream, Shamengwa finds an empty canoe with an old violin, and after Shamengwa’s death Judge Coutts uncovers that the canoe—set upon the water by Henri Peace—had been floating for nearly twenty years (216). Again, the magic is not related to Native heritage, though the violin is a kind of heritage that comes to Shamengwa and, later, to Corwin Peace from his ancestors. Also, in both of these instances, the magic is more hopeful than in *Tracks*, where it eventually fails. In that the magic aids both Mooshum and Shamengwa, there is a remainder of the resistant strain of the supernatural in *Tracks*. The other magical realist events in *The Plague of Doves* center around the middle story of Marn and Billy. Billy Peace can be compared to Pauline in *Tracks* in that both characters appear to be driven insane to a degree by colonial religions, though Billy chooses Pentecostalism over Pauline’s Catholicism. Some sense of a dark magical aura surrounds both characters, never more so than when Billy is struck by lightning:

Billy, the conductor with his arms raised, draws down the power. . . . A rope of golden fire snakes down and wraps Billy twice. He goes entirely black. A blue light pours from his chest. Then silence. A hushed suspension. Small pools of radiance hang in the air, wobble, and then disappear. . . . Ice balls smash down the mint and basil and lemon balm so the scents rise with the barbeque smell of burnt skin. . . . We watch as he rises, gathers himself up slowly . . . Billy is alive, bigger than before, swollen with unearthly power. (156)

While the reader never hears the interior voice of Billy, one assumes it would be similar to the deranged rantings of Pauline. Billy’s lightning survival is a powerful, magical moment in its own right, but Erdrich’s gorgeous, surreal writing style heightens the event and keeps the resistance to realism present in the text. Phrases such as “a rope of golden fire snakes down,” “blue light pours from his chest,” and “swollen with unearthly power” function on the level of beautiful prose but also as supernatural elements embedded in the writing as a way to erode the reality of the text. Again there is no Native derivative in this form of magical realism. This fantastic moment is followed by many others surrounding Marn and her plan to eliminate Billy. Marn begins to experience visions that she can potentially transfer to Billy (161). Her pet snakes begin talking and plotting with her, and at one point Marn and her daughter “hovered just an inch above the woven rug” (168). This moment is reminiscent of other floating incidents in magical realism.<sup>15</sup> The supernatural here is much more easily tied to Erdrich’s

---

<sup>15</sup>Both the priest in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the Trueba women of *The House of the Spirits* exhibit hovering.

resistance, both in an aesthetic and a cultural sense. As Erdrich's fantastical writing style continues to serve as a means of resistance, the magic here is serving an actual act of resistance in the narrative. Marn intends to kill Billy in order to save herself and her children. In this context, the magical realist elements of Marn's section function on multiple levels in that the magic is illustrating and speaking to the plight of those in active resistance. The magic is serving a different purpose in *The Plague of Doves* compared to *Tracks*, a more positive one given the magic carries success throughout the novel rather than failures, with the notable exception of the doves that recur through Holy Tracks and Mooshum's visions. However, these horrible injustice performed on Holy Tracks and Mooshum—and the doves surrounding them—serve a function of mourning and reconciliation by the end of the novel.

### **Nativeness and Inheritance**

Erdrich's magic is often misinterpreted as an assertion of Native beliefs, even of Nativeness itself. Many critics take this approach to Erdrich's novels, believing that the mixture of ambiguously supernatural events and metaphorical language contributes an inherently Indigenous quality to Erdrich's work. While the magic certainly is used to subvert the colonial worldview, Erdrich is not reasserting any ancient spiritual traditions through magic. And while some of the magic in *Tracks* emerges from Native beliefs, that magic fails. As *Tracks* is the earliest book in any of Erdrich's chronologies, other uses of magical realism do not contain an inherently Native context, despite the arguments of critics. In her essay "Technology, Magic, and Resistance in Native American Women's Writing" Margara Averbach claims that Native writers create subversion in texts by "adding tribal elements—for instance, a holistic idea of the world, which is the basis for the breaking of barriers" (10). Averbach is correct in Native writers' use of resistance, but her interpretation of that resistance is somewhat vague as there's nothing specifically Indigenous about a more holistic view of the world, a concept that crosses many cultural boundaries. Averbach is not alone in such reductive thinking, as Chavkin, Stirrup, and Velie's comments in the introduction can attest. In his analysis of the conclusion to *The Plague of Doves*, Robert C. Hamilton declares that Erdrich's "ambiguity can be read . . . as a resort to subversion, as a desire not to give away too much of Native American culture and secrets to the general public" (271). Such readings are supported by a removed and misguided understanding of Native cultures. Other critics argue that Native writing—especially writing containing magical elements—counters Western colonialism by asserting ancient Indigenous beliefs and practices.<sup>16</sup> While this is correct in that Native writers resist colonial narratives, this argument for ancient Indigenous beliefs as the replacement of that narrative makes both too much and too little of the Native writers' work: too much in that Averbach, Hamilton, and other critics appear to assume that Native writers have some primal connection to an archaic, magical worldview. This connection is often hinted at, but there's little evidence to the idea beyond stereotypes. The use of "tribal elements" as a means of resistance also makes too little of Native

---

<sup>16</sup>Bowers, Faris, and Zamora all make such claims in their analyses of magical realism. Bowers claims that Native writers use their ancient cultural beliefs to "lessen the power" of European colonial cultures "in order to articulate their communal histories which provide the necessary knowledge for establishing and articulating their cultural identities" (85). In this view, Native beliefs are both the tool and the aim of resistance to colonialism.

writers like Erdrich in that it places them in an exclusive cultural box which can neither be entered or exited. Thus the impact the writer's work should have on the wider culture is stunted. To claim that Erdrich is actively revealing some ancient Indian philosophy through her ambiguous use of magic or narrative style—though without revealing too much to keep the general public at bay—is the same mindset that allows Alan Velie to dismiss Erdrich's use of magic as “imported from South America” (61). In both Velie's and Hamilton's assertions, Erdrich's magical realism is depicted as deriving not from her own mind but from her cultural connections. Her genius and influence are confined and attributed elsewhere. While Erdrich's novels often concern Native problems, they are not deriving from, hiding, or advocating a return to Indigenous cultural beliefs.

Erdrich uses magical realism and other techniques not to advocate for Indigenous beliefs but rather to illustrate a disconnection from them. In his critical text *Native American Fiction*, David Treuer examines the cultural disconnections in *Love Medicine*. Treuer undertakes a complex analysis of the Ojibwe language used in the novel and finds that the language is often rough and imperfect, even when the characters speak Ojibwe in an effort to connect with their culture (62-64). Truer explains that these mistakes should have far-reaching effects on our interpretation of Erdrich's work: “Culture, as represented by Ojibwe words, is what the characters want. That they fetishize this or that word—and that those words don't communicate anything, rather they signify something—shows how culture is an idea that the characters don't possess but want to possess” (65). Treuer illustrates how the characters in *Love Medicine* are reaching for connection to their culture, even though the characters themselves are completely disconnected from that culture. This removal from culture—evoking but being unable to live by Native beliefs—function the same when applied to the magical realist elements of Erdrich's novels. In *Tracks*, Fleur and Nanapush are some of the last holdouts of the Anishinaabe ways. *Tracks* takes place between 1912 and 1924, long before most of the other novels. As the characters in Erdrich's connected universe progress in time, the disconnection from the “magical” elements of Anishinaabe culture fade further into the past. By *Love Medicine*'s 1981, the supernatural events are just leftover stories, another piece of disconnection with the ancient culture.<sup>17</sup> This loss is illustrated early in the novel when Albertine attempts to piece back together her family's broken pies: “I spooned the fillings back into the crusts, married slabs of dough, smoothed over edges of crusts with a wetted finger, fit crimps to crimps and even fluff to fluff on top of berries or pudding. I worked carefully for over an hour. But once they smash there is no way to put them right” (42). Albertine's sentiment applies not only to the Kashpaw pies, but also to the magical elements of the Anishinaabe past. *Tracks* is partly revered as Erdrich's more magical realist text because it's the first in the chronology, the closest text to the loss of the supernatural in Anishinaabe culture and the transition into a new way of life.

This disconnection from heritage and magic continues in *The Plague of Doves*, which—taking place mostly in the 1960s and 70s—sits closer to *Love Medicine* in

---

<sup>17</sup>This concept is especially evident in *Love Medicine* where the old culture is represented by the return of Lipsha's ghostly ancestors. Ghosts function in *Love Medicine* as the return of long-dead relatives, but they also illustrate the returning ghost of lost Anishinaabe culture that must be equally mourned.

Erdrich's fictional universe. The loss of culture is mentioned early in the novel by Mooshum and his brother Shamengwa in their lament of the death of Louis Riel, an important Michif figure in Canadian history who attempted to rebel and create an independent Michif state. While talking to Father Cassidy, Shamengwa claims, "If Riel had won, our parents would have stayed in Canada, whole people. Not broken. We would have been properly raised up. My arm would work" (33). Shamengwa and Mooshum speak of Riel as if he were a saint or supernatural entity, called "the visionary hero of our people" (21). The suggestion of Riel as supernatural is even more pronounced by Shamengwa's pronouncement that "My arm would work," suggesting that Riel may have had some magically positive influence over all their existences, similar to a saint. The old men reminiscing of Riel is itself a mourning of a magical loss, the noble rebellion of Louis Riel appearing fantastical when compared to the dull repetitions of reservation life. Another example of the mourning of lost heritage in *The Plague of Doves* involves Evelina's literal inheritance: her father's stamp collection. Robert C. Hamilton's analysis of Erdrich's novel focuses intensely on the function of stamps and stamp collecting as symbols of "anxiety over ancestry and the stories of one's tradition" (267). Evelina's father is cheated out of his rightful inheritance by sister, Neve Harp. However, Evelina's father takes a few small stamp collections from his family home. These stamps are later revealed to be of astronomical value, worth more almost as much money as is contained in the entire town of Pluto (Erdrich 300). The stamps serve as Evelina's heritage, yet she has no concept of their value. While driving the stamps to Fargo, Evelina's father crashes his car, and the stamps collection is destroyed: "The leather-bound books were splayed open, warped, and ruined. We picked stamps off cattails and peeled stamps from wet clods of mud. When we brought what we'd found to his hospital bed, Dad looked sick. . . We hadn't known the stamps could really be that valuable" (266). Although Evelina's father is not a Native American, the torn stamp collection serves as a metaphor for the lost magic of Native culture, much like the splattered Kashpaw pies in *Love Medicine*. After he recovers, Evelina's father attempts to repair his stamps, but the valuable collection is fully lost. However, a bright, almost magical moment appears at the end of loss when Evelina and her father connect over the lost inheritance. "When he lifted the stamp with a tweezers, it fell into a little heap of incredibly precious dust . . . A moment passed. He asked me to come with him to the back door and watch half a million dollars vanish" (266). The fleeting culture is still precious and beautiful, even in its loss. Hamilton highlights clear parallels between this moment in the text Shamengwa's lament concerning Louis Riel, but Hamilton also draws a larger connection the loss of the valuable stamps and "the entire postcolonial sense of loss experienced by Native populations" (267). There's a sense in *The Plague of Doves* that Evelina's heritage—along with the rest of the reservation's potential—has vanished forever due to the long history of racial strife and violence, illustrated by the 1911 murders and lynchings around which the novel turns.

It is with the lynching of Holy Tracks the magical elements come full circle. The plague of doves from the novel's opening are a nuisance, but also a sign of plenty to the citizens of the reservation. There is a sense of abundance surrounding the doves, so much so that Mooshum and his wife are able to live on their own out in the wilderness on nothing but doves (Erdrich 15). The doves' status as a semi-magical element to the text is

elevated during one of the darkest passages, the actual lynching of Holy Tracks. As he's hanging, the boy looks to the sky and has a vision of the doves: "Behind his shut eyes he was seized by black fear, until he heard his mother say, *Open your eyes*, and he stared into the dusty blue. Then it was better. The little wisps of clouds, way up high, had resolved into wings and they swept across the sky now, faster and faster" (79). This is a magical realist element in a number of senses. The words could be interpreted literally in that Holy Tracks had a vision of doves before his death. Under this view, the granting of the vision would be a kind of reproach and thus a blaming and resistance aimed at the settlers. The text could also be metaphorical, in which case it would fall under Erdrich's lyrical writing that serves to resist colonial realism. Both understandings serve the text's concepts of resistant and mourning the loss of culture. The doves could be connected to a lost culture in much the same way as Misshepehu in *Tracks*, the pie in *Love Medicine*, or the stamp collection in *Plague of Doves*. When Evelina is musing on her grandfather's story, she notes that the doves were "surely the passenger pigeons of legend and truth, whose numbers were such that nobody thought they could possibly ever be wiped from the earth" (19). The pigeons are another symbol of a heritage lost or stolen by violence and colonialism; but despite their bleak connotations, the doves create a hopeful bookend to the magical elements of the novel. When Evelina and Mooshum are commemorating Holy Tracks by hanging, Mooshum reiterates Holy Track's peaceful vision of the afterlife: "Awee, my girl. The doves are still up there" (254). Holy Track's vision of the doves solidifies the magical realist elements of *The Plague of Doves* as equally resistant and mournful as those in *Tracks*, while the doves also signify a more hopeful element in this novel compared to its twenty-year predecessor.

### **"A Self-Renewing Nature"**

While both *Tracks* and *The Plague of Doves* use magical realism and supernatural elements to resist colonial realism and to mourn the loss of Native culture, there's an ultimately hopeful and future-focused strain to both texts, and to the techniques of magical realism as a whole. Although Fleur's supernatural abilities fail her and her family in *Tracks*, a new way of living is begun. The last few pages of the novel demonstrate a small success in that Nanapush has taken Father Damien's advice and "become a bureaucrat . . . to reach through the loophole and draw you [Lulu] home" (225). Despite his reliance on old Anishinaabe culture, Nanapush has been able to adapt and successfully bring Lulu home to her makeshift family. A similar toward recovery and reconciliation occurs at the end of *The Plague of Doves* when Cordelia not only understands but celebrates the fact that she saved her family's murderer's life (311). In that sense—and with all the couplings occurring between the descendants of victims and perpetrators—the citizens of Pluto and the reservation are moving toward a brighter future. This sense of hope at the novel's end is partly the result of the hard nugget of resistance Erdrich's writing and use of magical realism have sustained throughout the novel. There's an inherent touch of hope in any resistance, and the struggles against colonial encroachment on culture and worldview in Erdrich's novels illustrate that hope. Erdrich doesn't rely on a simplistic version of her Native heritage to achieve this hopeful resistance. Through the use of narrative technique, lyrical writing, and magical realism, Erdrich "ensures that her readers are always aware, not of pristine culture, but of the

strategies of survivance that have seen a people endure, adapt, and persist against stark odds” (Stirrup 204). Surviving is always an underlying theme in Erdrich’s work, especially in *Tracks*. Bookending Erdrich’s third novel with *The Plague of Doves* describes an outlook beyond surviving, through the mourning a lost culture, and toward a more hopeful Native identity that can use magic to both resist colonial influences and create a new Native cultural view. Critic David Mikics posits that magical realism is a way “toward a wild, self-renewing nature . . . to free the imagination from the oppressive nearness of the past” (383). Freeing the magical imagination from past failures for future generations of writers is exactly what Erdrich has achieved.

### Works Cited

- Averbach, Margara. “Technology, ‘Magic,’ and Resistance in Native American Women’s Writing.” *Femspec* 2.2 (2001): 7-15. Print.
- Bowers, Maggie Ann. *Magic(al) Realism*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Carpentier, Alejo. *The Kingdom of This World*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957. Print.
- . “On the Marvelous Real in America.” *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Lois Parker Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham, NC: Duke U P, 1995. 75-88. Print.
- Chavkin, Allan, ed. *The Chippewa Landscape of Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1999. Print.
- Erdrich, Louise. Interview with Liane Hansen. *Weekend Edition*. National Public Radio, 4 May 2008. Web. 10 Nov. 2014.
- . Interview with Lisa Halliday. *The Paris Review*. The Paris Review, 2010. Web. 10 Nov. 2014.
- . *Love Medicine*. 1984. New York: Perennial-Harper, 1993. Print.
- . *The Plague of Doves*. New York: Harper Collins, 2008. Print.
- . *Tracks*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988. Print.
- Faris, Wendy B. “Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction.” *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Lois Parker Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham, NC: Duke U P, 1995. 165-190. Print.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. “Identity Politics, Syncretism, Catholicism, and Anishinabe Religion in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*.” *Religion & Literature* 26.1 (1994): 107-127. Print.
- Green, Matthew J. A. “Dreams of Freedom: Magical Realism and Visionary Materialism in Okri and Blake.” *Romanticism: The Journal of Romantic Culture and Criticism* 15.1 (2009): 18-32. Print.
- Hamilton, Robert C. “Disaster Stamps: The Significance of Philately in Louise Erdrich’s *The Plague of Doves*.” *ANQ* 26.4 (2013): 266-272. Print.
- Kafka, Franz. “The Metamorphosis.” *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. Trans. Donna Freed. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003. 7-52. Print.
- Marquez, Gabriel Garcia. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. 1967. Trans. Gregory Rabassa. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006. Print.

- Mikics, David. "Derek Walcott and Alejo Carpentier: Nature, History, and the Caribbean Writer." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Lois Parker Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham, NC: Duke U P, 1995. 371-404. Print.
- Okri, Ben. *The Famished Road*. New York: Anchor Books, 1991. Print.
- . Interview with Anita Sethi. *The National*. The National, 1 Sept. 2011. Web. 15 Nov. 2014.
- Roh, Franz. "Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Lois Parker Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham, NC: Duke U P, 1995. 15-31. Print.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. "Here's an Odd Artifact for the Fairy-Tale Shelf." Rev. of *The Beet Queen*, by Louise Erdrich. *Impact*, 8 Oct. 1986. 10-11. Print.
- Stirrup, David. *Louise Erdrich*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010. Print.
- Treuer, David. *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual*. St. Paul: Graywolf P, 2006. Print.
- Velie, Alan. "Magical Realism and Ethnicity: The Fantastic in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich." *Native American Women in Literature and Culture*. Eds. Susan Castillo and Victor M.P. Da Rosa. Lisbon, Portugal: U of Fernando Pessoa P, 1997. 57-67. Print.
- Zamora, Lois Parker and Wendy B. Faris. "Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ies)s." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Lois Parker Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham, NC: Duke U P, 1995. 1-11. Print.