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The Trickster and World Maintenance

An Anishinaabe Reading of Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*

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Catherine Rainwater developed one of the more insightful analyses of Louise Erdrich's writing, arguing that the cultural codes at conflict within the characters of her novels leave the reader with a sense of alienation (442). Reading her essay, however, it is evident she was addressing an audience that did not have personal knowledge of or experience with the social and political traumas presented in Erdrich's works, particularly the loss of land and genocide of a people. There is a group of individuals, however, who can relate firsthand to the events in Erdrich's writing: American Indians in general and the Anishinaabe in particular. If Erdrich's writing is supposed to generate a feeling of alienation on the part of the reader, what about those readers—American Indians—who already feel a sense of alienation? Is the expectation that Indians reading her works will become more alienated? Or, is it the assumption that Indians have no interest in written literature, do not participate in mainstream culture at all, and so will not read Erdrich in the first place?

The challenge, then, is not to contradict Rainwater's interpretation; in fact, she makes a valuable contribution to understanding the writings of Erdrich. The analysis can be expanded, however, by providing a reading from an Anishinaabe point of view, a reading that generates within the reader a feeling of empowerment, not alienation. If there is one overriding characteristic of the characters in the corpus of Erdrich's works, it is that they are survivors. Despite all the attempts by the government and mainstream society to undermine Anishinaabe culture and, essentially, conduct genocide against the

Indians, the Anishinaabe survive. Nonetheless, as an Anishinaabe and a scholar of religion, one of the main issues I see at work in Erdrich is not simply the survival of the Anishinaabe, but the manner in which that survival occurs. Especially in the case of her novel *Tracks*, it is evident that those individuals best survive who adapt mainstream culture to Anishinaabe culture and their own personal interests.¹ By the same token, they also adhere to traditional culture while adjusting themselves to broader society. In essence, these characters can be said to embody the personality of the trickster, Wena-bozho, the hero of story and legend among the Anishinaabe of both yesterday and today.² It is the tricksters who survive to build a new world on the ashes of the old.

THE ANISHINAABE APOCALYPSE

We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall.

Louise Erdrich, *Tracks*

These are the first words of *Tracks*, spoken by Nanapush, the middle-aged man of some fifty years, who, because of the deaths in the tribe, is now seen as an old man. In fact, his words in the opening two pages of the work describe the Anishinaabe apocalypse. This was not simply a difficult time for the Anishinaabe; it is also not a description of a people being "marginalized," as the scholarship often describes genocide (Bak, Rainwater, Tidwell). It was the end of the world as the Anishinaabe had known it. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the word "last" is repeated so often. Nanapush speaks of the last buffalo, bear, beaver, and birch, all "other-than-human" relations who live with the Anishinaabe (T 2). From the Anishinaabe point of view, the earth, sun, moon, animals, and plants are all relations (Hallowell, Ojibwa Ontology 45). Nanapush tells of their dying. Instead of a world where the Anishinaabe live and work with their relations, a new world has come into existence, one dominated by outsiders, as represented by the "wind from the east, bringing exile in a storm of government papers" (T 1).

The apocalypse also brought about the end of entire family groups. In the case of both Nanapush and Fleur, they were the sole surviving members of their respective families. Much like the loss of animal relatives, the end of the Anishinaabe world saw the loss of human relatives. So, not only was the world made void of animal relations, human relations disappeared as well, the emotional impact of which cannot be overstated.

These devastating results are what I refer to as postapocalypse stress syndrome (PASS), which attempts to capture the profound psychological effects an apocalyptic event can have on a population. As both Nanapush in a fictional setting and Meyer in her study of the White Earth Anishinaabe indicate, early in the twentieth century, entire families died the most wretched deaths, coughing to death in a pool of their own blood, and there was absolutely nothing that could be done about it. The consequences of such loss can be overwhelming, as Myer reports in discussing the situation on White Earth: "In one home the diseased inhabitants just sat and stared" (220). Under these types of conditions, posttraumatic stress disorder becomes pandemic. However, because of the total devastation, social institutions, which normally would assist a society in recovery, are weakened or collapse, resulting in the larger, more problematic PASS. With the onset of PASS, a series of social dysfunctions occur to deal with the loss, which can include increased substance abuse, violence, unemployment, and suicide. These outward manifestations of dysfunction reflect a feeling of despair, loss of hope, and sense of survivor's guilt, and can lead to other types of behavior, such as the abandonment of established forms of religion and the adoption of fanatical forms of religious practice. As might be expected, though, increased rates of substance abuse is the most common result. As Nanapush stated, "Our trouble came from living, from liquor, and the dollar bill" (T 4).

However, self-medicating with liquor was not the only strategy adopted by the characters in *Tracks* to deal with the effects of PASS. In fact, they exhibit a range of responses in line with those predicted by the theory as they attempt to survive in the wake of the apocalypse and build new lives.

FLEUR

Fleur is an extremely complicated character whose story weaves in and out of Erdrich's interconnected narratives. By the time she reaches old age in *The Bingo Palace*, she is a community elder, noted for having served as the midwife for many of the people in the senior citizen's center. Though treated with caution, she uses her healing powers for the common good (126). In fact, after her death, the people believe she still resides on Matchimanito island, watching over them, a fitting end for Fleur who started her life on the shores of Matchimanito Lake (273–74). In the end, Fleur is a successful survivor.

However, long before this time period, Fleur uses her talents towards other ends. Fleur starts off as a strong figure with an abundance of powers and abilities. At the start of her career, Fleur is in a spiritual relationship with one of the most powerful manitous in Anishinaabe culture, Michibizhii, the water man (Smith 95–125).³ Yet instead of electing to use those blessings for good, she chooses to follow a path of fear and intimidation in order to survive. After all she has gone through, that might not be surprising. Her family dies, so she has no teachers to assist her in harnessing her powers for good. She is raped by white men while working in Argus. So, she cannot be blamed for being angry, as she initially isolates herself in the woods and uses her powers to make others fear her. Yet for all her strength, by the end of *Tracks* she is divested of what matters the most in Anishinaabe life: community, children, and land. Her ultimate failure speaks to the shortcomings of using great blessings to do great harm.

One word best sums up Fleur at the beginning of the novel: confidence. This confidence runs through every endeavor she undertakes, and it provides her with the edge to claim one victory after another. Early in the story Fleur is working at Pete Kozka's meat store in Argus. The wolf-like grin she gives Pauline in asking for money to enter the card game with the male employees reveals the self-assurance of a hunter about to dispatch easy prey. And, indeed, Fleur's card playing ability is the first victory she scores and the initial evidence of her remarkable abilities (*T* 17–31). Fleur puts on an amazing

display of skill at playing cards, which should have alerted the men to her schemes. As Pauline observed, Fleur always ended the card playing sessions with exactly one dollar (*T* 21). Fleur was so confident of herself and her abilities that she dared show the men their upcoming fate. That fate is reached soon enough when the men lose all of their hard-earned income for the summer to her in one, last dramatic game.

The men then rape her, which merely sets the scene for Fleur to display her abilities at magic. Out of the hot August sky, Fleur draws a powerful wind that leaves most of the town intact, yet destroys the meat shop, where the three men freeze to death in the icehouse while seeking shelter from the storm.

The source of Fleur's magic quickly becomes evident; it is the water monster, Michibizhii. It has incredible strength, but can be extremely dangerous. When going on a vision quest, children are especially advised to reject any offer of help from water creatures in general and Michibizhii in particular (Vecsey 125). Fleur is in a different position, though. Her family has had a long relationship with the waterman. It was her own father, after all, who, Nanabush says, brought the lake man with him from the east. She thus seeks out Michibizhii as part of her family's heritage. In doing so, she nearly drowns three times, but each time has somebody else take her place. This was the case with George Many Women, who avoided water at all costs, only to drown in his bathtub (*T* 10–11). The power Fleur derives from Michibizhii becomes clear in other ways as well, including hunting and sex.

Fleur lives by herself deep in the woods, yet she manages to take care of herself quite well. Part of that has to do with the money she won in Argus. A bigger factor is her ability to hunt. However, it is not just this hunting prowess that is significant. More important is the manner in which she conducts her hunting. As Pauline relates, in following Fleur's tracks through the woods, the footsteps gradually alter in appearance, changing from a human to an ursine form (*T* 12). Fleur is what the Anishinaabe call a bearwalker, one of the most feared types of shamans (Vecsey 148).

Her ability to hunt connects with her sexual power as well, and

both work together as she snares her future husband, Eli. Fleur is a known person in the community, and much feared. No man would go near her. Eli, though, is led to Fleur, and it is unclear if this was by accident or by design. While out tracking a deer, Eli eventually comes across Fleur, who had already taken the deer for herself. It soon becomes evident that she intends to take Eli for herself as well (*T* 41–45). It is true that Nanapush helps Eli with some love medicine, much against the advice of the old man (*T* 45). Still, it can be questioned as to who was the real protagonist at work (*T* 48). In the end, Fleur and Eli get together, and their actions are simply scandalous. They engage in all manner of sexual activity, even shocking the old and experienced Nanapush, who, at his advanced age, presumably had seen enough over the years to be jaded to all but the most perverse sexual escapades (*T* 48).

Fleur also uses her power to protect her land. Nanapush relates that the reservation agent who goes out to Fleur's land to collect fee money for the Pillager allotments suffers a grim fate, "living in the woods and eating roots, gambling with ghosts" (*T* 9). Other individuals who dare "come looking for profit" on Pillager land fall victim to the same curse, "betting with sticks and dice out near Matchimanito at night" (*T* 9).

Because of her powers, Fleur becomes known and feared in the community. People shun her presence and do not dare tread on her land. She is a strong woman, and no one crosses her path. She gets her powers by turning to the water man for help. Thus, the strategy Fleur chooses to deal with the presence of non-Indians in the area is to fall back on the traditional worldview, but not traditional in a good way. She counts on the fear engendered in her association with Michibizhii to deal with the encroaching white men. Yet for all her power, her strength temporarily fades, as does she by the end of this phase of her life history.

The most heartbreaking evidence for Fleur's loss of power occurs with the death of her second child (*T* 158–163). Pauline and Fleur are left alone in the woods when Fleur unexpectedly goes into labor. It could be argued that Pauline's clumsiness and ignorance doom the unborn child, but the narrative supports a different interpretation.

Fleur and Pauline travel the road of the dead towards the west, where they eventually enter the land of the deceased. In a dramatic encounter, Fleur meets her old enemies—the men from the meat store in Argus—and they gamble for the lives of Fleur's children, Lulu and the unborn. Fleur is able to save Lulu, but she has no luck with the second child. From this point on, Fleur enters a downward spiral from which she is unable to recover in this novel.

As her powers begin to fade, she is reduced to desperate measures to save her land. Along with the other members of the household, Fleur begins collecting cranberry bark, hoping to raise enough money to pay the tax assessment (*T* 176). As Nanapush relates, Fleur works herself to exhaustion (*T* 177). One has to wonder why Fleur takes this difficult approach when she has other means at her disposal, such as her gambling abilities. The incident with her lost child drained Fleur of her confidence, however, and she is reduced to finding the most difficult means to carry on (*T* 177).

For all her efforts, Fleur is unable to save her land. Through an act of duplicity, Nector uses the money raised by selling cranberry bark to pay the taxes on the Kashpaw allotment (*T* 207). At this juncture, Fleur makes one last stand (*T* 218–24). Spending time alone in the woods, she very carefully saws the trees partway through the trunks. On the day the lumberjacks arrive to begin taking the timber, Fleur leaves with her belongings on a cart she pulls herself. The wind storm which rears up and knocks down the trees around the frightened workers makes for a dramatic finish to the story (*T* 223–4). However, the irony of the situation should not be lost. In contrasting this event with the wind Fleur conjured up in the beginning of the story, the differences are telling. At the start of the novel, Fleur's powers are strong, and she is an overwhelmingly confident woman. By the end of the tale, her abilities have almost entirely deserted her. She chose to use her power to inspire fear and intimidation, and it did not work. As a strategy for survival, using her blessings to do harm proved to be a losing gamble. For now, Fleur loses her land and fades away. She has to go into a period of exile before she can again have a serious impact on her people, including her own child.

Nonetheless Fleur remains a sympathetic character. The descent

of Anishinaabe society into PASS made her life extremely difficult. Most likely she suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder. She watched her entire family die before her eyes. She was raped. She had every reason to be angry at the world. The theory of PASS also predicts that in the wake of societal collapse, cultural institutions will come under stress as well. That very situation affected Fleur. She did not have the strong family and religious leadership available to help channel her powers toward the good. Overwhelmed by her circumstances without a loving, guiding hand, it is little wonder she would lash out, using her powers as best she knew to somehow survive in a world turned upside down. It would take years before she recovered enough to find the good in her heart and use her powers to assist others. The length of time it took Fleur to turn to the good was a tragedy for herself and her community, and is but one example of the deep and abiding negative effects of PASS.

PAULINE

In the wake of the Anishinaabe apocalypse, Pauline takes an approach that, while similar to Fleur's in some ways, is dramatically different as well. Like Fleur, Pauline turns to religion. Pauline's strategy for survival, however, is to deny and turn against her Indian heritage. While this approach works in the sense that Pauline is eventually able to find a community she can call home, from the Anishinaabe point of view it is a failure.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Pauline's personality is that she does not want to be Indian; she wants to be white. In fact, that is the very first declaration she makes about herself. "I wanted to be like my mother," she narrates, "who showed her half-white. I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian" (*T* 14). And, to her father she says in regards to the Indian way of life, "I was made for better" (*T* 14). Part of her decision may have been influenced by how she sees the changing face of the world and her interpretation of it. For her, the world was becoming white and, "even as a child I saw that to hang back was to perish" (*T* 14). She credits the superiority of whites for this state of affairs, "It was like that with Him, too, Our Lord, who had

obviously made the whites more shrewd, as they grew in number, all around, some even owning automobiles, while the Indians receded and coughed to death and drank" (*T* 139). Her desire to be white eventually leads her to have visions, which allow her to deny her Indian heritage in its entirety. While at the convent, Pauline envisions Christ visiting her and revealing that, "I was not one speck of Indian, but wholly white" (*T* 137).

Pauline also suffers from some form of mental illness (Cornell, Hessler, Sergi, Sloboda, Rainwater). The key features of her illness are extreme self-absorption, narcissism, and delusions of grandeur. Pauline recognizes that she is not an attractive woman, but that does not stop her from being completely self-absorbed and narcissistic. The most extreme example of this concerns her feelings about Jesus Christ. She believes Christ is a weak figure, unable to defeat the Anishinaabe spirits on his own. So, she takes it upon herself to battle the monster in the lake, Michibizhii. Pauline's claim that Christ is weak and she is strong has to be the ultimate form of hubris. This calls into question Pauline's religious practices as well, which will be discussed in more detail below. In trying to become a saint, which even the community of nuns recognizes she is working towards, it becomes evident that she is not doing so for the greater glory of Christ, but instead to satisfy her own feelings of superiority. As she herself states, "I knew there was never a martyr like me" (*T* 192).

Pauline's mental illness becomes coupled with a fanatical form of religious expression, one manifestation of PASS. From the point of view of the social dysfunctions that occur in the wake of an apocalypse, Pauline's fanaticism comes as no surprise. Perhaps the most important feature of her practices is that she keeps looking for more and more radical forms of self-torture (*T* 143–46). Wearing undergarments made of course cloth and wearing her shoes on the wrong feet are not sufficient for her. Instead she keeps driving herself to greater levels of masochistic behavior, finally settling on refusing to relieve herself during the daylight hours, upon the hint that doing so would ensure her sainthood. Of course, Nanapush, in his trickster fashion, undoes all her efforts (*T* 147–51). The pattern is established, however, and Pauline insists on maintaining a regimen of self-torture.

Her desire to be white, her continuing mental illness, and her fanatical religious practice drive her towards internalizing racism against Indians. Pauline makes the decision to become a full participant in the destruction of Indian culture. In fact, she sees it as her mission. Of course, her efforts take on grandiloquent proportions, fighting devils Christ himself would dare not approach. It takes on other forms, too, as when she disrupts the healing ceremony Nanapush is performing for Fleur (*T* 187–91). But perhaps most insidious of all is the assimilation of Anishinaabe children in the Catholic schools. As Pauline recognizes, the old will die off, and the young “return from the government schools blinded and deafened” (*T* 205). Pauline, now Sister Leopolda, the lion of God, is assigned to teach in one of these schools, where she vows “to use my influence to guide them, to purify their minds, to mold them in my own image” (*T* 205). Pauline, in effect, has become the worst enemy of her own people, striving in every way imaginable to wipe out her own Native culture.

Oddly enough, she uses Anishinaabe culture, especially visions, in her efforts to destroy the culture. Her spiritual career begins with a vision of herself as a winged animal, “my wings raked the air, and I rose in three powerful beats” (*T* 68). She remembers the details of her flight as well: “I knew that after I circled, studied, saw all, I touched down on my favorite branch and tucked my head beneath the shelter of my wing” (*T* 68–9). She continues to have visions, especially at the convent, and her visions push her to attack Anishinaabe culture. At one point or another, she identifies any number of enemies of Christ, including Fleur, Nanapush, and, of course, her final enemy, Michibizhii. And, in a vision-induced frenzy, she believes she succeeds in subduing Michibizhii. After murdering Napoleon, whom she mistakes for Michibizhii, Pauline believes she has succeeded in ending Anishinaabe culture (*T* 202–4). From her point of view, it is simply a matter of time before the culture dies out completely. In that sense, her actions are ironic in that she uses her own culture to destroy it. This is but one more manifestation of the degree to which she has internalized racism against her own people.

In the end, Pauline is rewarded for being a traitor. From a white point of view, she is a success. Despite the prohibition against accept-

ing Indian girls into the convent, the community of nuns takes in Pauline. It would be foolish to think the Mother Superior is not aware of Pauline's background. Sister Saint Anne, however, is willing to overlook Pauline's heritage in the face of Pauline's insistence that she is not Indian (*T* 138). Once in the convent, her obvious mental illness is overlooked, and, to a certain degree, encouraged (*T* 164). Her superiors recognize she has the potential to become a saint, and, by the time of *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, she is nominated for beatification.

From an Anishinaabe point of view, however, she is a failure. She is no longer part of the Anishinaabe community; it is clear that her loyalty is to the white establishment. Although she tries to deny and hide her pregnancy, it is well known in the community. Yet she disclaims her child, and so loses her daughter (*T* 131–36). And, of course, she has no land. As a strategy for adaptation in the face of PASS, the approach followed by Pauline—denying her Indian heritage and working to subvert it—is not to be recommended.

NANAPUSH AND MARGARET

Nanapush and Margaret need to be considered together. Both follow the same strategy for adaptation and survival, participating in the new ways of the white world, but maintaining Anishinaabe culture as well. This is the most successful approach in dealing with PASS since they are able to keep their land and their “child” in the person of Lulu, and remain members of the community.

Both Nanapush and Margaret are tricksters. Between the two, Nanapush is the more obvious trickster figure. In the case of Nanapush, Erdrich clearly intended him to be a trickster. In discussing his name, Nanapush relates how, “My father said, ‘Nanapush. That’s what you’ll be called. Because it’s got to do with trickery and living in the bush. Because it’s got to do with something a girl can’t resist. The first Nanapush stole fire. You will steal hearts’” (*T* 33). The first Nanapush referred to here is the Anishinaabe trickster figure. Throughout the course of the novel, the character Nanapush acts in typical trickster fashion as well.

Most especially, he directs his efforts at tricking people into revealing their weaknesses and trapping his enemies. As discussed above, Nanapush is able to determine the secret Pauline, now a novice, is trying to hide from everyone, including her superiors at the convent. Pauline has received a hint that if she does not relieve herself during the day, she may expect eternal life (*T* 148). Having discerned her secret, Nanapush lays a trap, offering Pauline tea and telling a story about water, which “in the old language there are a hundred ways to describe” (*T* 149). Eventually, Pauline cannot restrain herself, and she rushes to relieve herself (*T* 151). Nanapush is also able to get revenge on Clarence Morrissey for kidnapping him and Margaret and shaving off Margaret’s hair. He and Eli decide to snare Clarence. Nanapush steals a piano wire from the church’s piano, and sets a trap outside of the Morrissey house. While the snare fails to dispatch Clarence, who is able to save himself at the last second by spreading his legs and catching them on the sides of the pit, the trap has nonetheless done its work of satisfying both his and Margaret’s desire for revenge (*T* 119–22). Finally, he embarrasses George Pukwan, Jr., who is investigating the death of Napoleon Morrissey. While at confession, he relates to Father Damien—in a voice loud enough for the eavesdropping Pukwan and the rest of the congregation to hear—that he has seen Pukwan making “love with himself” (*T* 216). The humiliated Pukwan can only creep away.

While the examples of Margaret playing the role of the trickster are much less numerous, they can be found. Once it becomes apparent that Fleur is pregnant, Margaret sets out to determine who the father might be, hoping to exonerate her son, Eli. In comparing Margaret’s efforts to Eli’s trapping, Nanapush says, “Margaret set her own trapline, too. Hers was just as carefully laid out, around the kitchen table” (*T* 52). Eventually Pauline takes the bait, and she relates all she knows about what happened to Fleur in Argus. Margaret’s trickery had worked: “She had the story of Fleur and Argus, in the words of a firsthand witness” (*T* 53).

Both Nanapush and Margaret follow the old ways. The manner in which Nanapush adheres to traditional life, values, and customs is obvious enough. At the beginning of the novel, he makes love medi-

cine for Eli. Determined to have Fleur for his own, Eli implores Nanapush for love medicine. Although the old man is hesitant at first, he eventually succumbs and gives in to Eli's request (*T* 45). The charm works, and Eli is able to take Fleur as his own. Later, when Eli and Nanapush are living together after Fleur and Eli have their falling out, Nanapush dreams Eli's hunting success so that Eli cannot only take down a moose, but safely bring it back to their cabin (*T* 101–05). Nanapush is able to make other kinds of medicine besides love medicine. After Fleur loses her baby in childbirth, her powers start to fade. In response, Nanapush attempts an old-time cure for her. Of course, the ceremony is disrupted by Pauline. Nonetheless, he did have his sources of medicine (*T* 187–91). Nanapush was not a treaty Indian, either. From the very beginning, he was opposed to the government treaties (*T* 2). He further advised his people to not sign the "Beauchamp Treaty," even though he was a government translator (*T* 100). He saw himself as a holdout and absolutely refused to give the government his name (*T* 32). The land, he recognized, is the only thing that lasts from life to life, and in the end, even though he had a Jesuit education, he says of himself, "I ran back to the woods and forgot all my prayers" (*T* 33). In fact, he even concludes, right in the middle of Catholic Mass, that "the old gods were better" (*T* 110).

It might be suspected that Margaret had turned away from the old ways since she insists that Nanapush and Lulu attend Mass. However, she follows traditional ways as well. While crossing Matchimanito Lake after visiting Fleur, the water becomes rough, and Margaret is forced to bail water. She begins praying to the Virgin Mary, but she prays to the manitous as well. In fact, even before they set out on the water, she makes an offering of tobacco (*T* 51). Of particular interest is the kidnapping scene of Nanapush and Margaret (*T* 111–115). Margaret and Nanapush fight their assailants as if they were Sioux enemies, with Margaret uttering "a war cry that had not been heard for fifty years" (*T* 112). After they are tied up, Margaret speaks to them in the old language, saying to Clarence and Boy Lazarre, "Let me teach you how to die" (*T* 114). Finally, as they attack her, she sings her death song over and over. Clarence and Boy, of course, cut off her hair, which had never been cut "in this life before" (*T* 115). Clearly, in her

most desperate times, Margaret acts like an Indian. She also holds on to Indian values. Margaret talks against selling the land, holding it just as dear as Nanapush (*T* 111). In the end, it is no wonder Nanapush described her as “no treaty Indian” (*T* 100).

One thing that especially marks Nanapush and Margaret as old-time Indians is that they engage in sexual teasing. In just about every scene in which Margaret and Nanapush appear together, they sexually tease each other. Their teasing is also extremely bawdy and graphic. One example from the start of the story will suffice to illustrate this point. In their first scene together, Margaret wants to know who taught Eli about sex. She asks:

“Who’d he learn that from?”

“Maybe my late partner Kaspaw,” I pondered.

She puffed her cheeks out, fumed, “Not from him!”

“Not that you knew.” . . .

“Old man,” she scorned, “two wrinkled berries and a twig.”

“A twig can grow,” I offered.

“But only in the spring.” (*T* 48)

Other examples follow this same pattern (*T* 50, 51, 53, 125, 128, 144, 169, and 226). This type of teasing is a long-time character trait of the Anishinaabe. In the old days, potential mates were referred to *ninam*, or *ninamak* in the plural. Sexual teasing was not only expected but encouraged between people in this type of relationship. Cross cousins were considered the ideal mate, and sexually teasing between this class of cousins was the rule. Hallowell provides an example of the sexual teasing common in Anishinaabe society:

On one occasion when old Chief Berens and I were making a trip together we had barely stepped out of the canoe at one encampment when he began bantering an old woman about sneaking into her tent at night. She was one of his *ninamak* whom he had not seen for perhaps twenty-five years. On another occasion, a married woman much younger than himself said to him, “Do you think you can make your way through?” The answer was, “The older you get the stiffer the horn.” I have

heard such talk again and again, by people of all ages. ("Psychosexual Adjustment" 296)

Margaret and Nanapush exactly fit this pattern. Sexual teasing is a major component of their relationship, and it identifies them as old-time Indians. Along with the other ways they maintain their loyalty to Anishinaabe customs, the two adhere to traditional culture.

They also make adaptations to the new ways as well. Nanapush was educated at a Jesuit school, in "the halls of St. John" (*T* 33), and on more than one occasion he makes reference to the fact that he can read and write (*T* 2, 33, 47–48). He does not seem to be much of a practicing Christian, but he respects and participates in the Church. For example, he attends the Benediction Mass on a cold winter night with Margaret, bringing Lulu along with him (*T* 109). He even goes to confession, although his motives for doing so are questionable—to embarrass and humiliate George Pukwan, Jr., who is being overzealous in his investigation of the murder of Napoleon Morrissey (*T* 216). Most importantly, by the end of the novel, despite his suspicions of the government, he becomes the tribal chairman. His purpose is to bring Lulu home (*T* 225). Still, without making some compromise with the new world order, he never would have been able to get her back at all.

Margaret makes her own adaptations as well. She is the more devout of the two. Thus, as mentioned above, even though she prays to the manitous while on the lake, she also prays to the Virgin Mary (*T* 51). In relating this episode, Nanapush mentions that Margaret keeps a picture of the Virgin nailed to her wall. Margaret is the one who pushes Nanapush to go to Church (*T* 109). If Nanapush had his way, he probably would not attend church because he does not like "sitting on hard planks" (*T* 110). Overall, then, Margaret has a deeper faith in Christianity. Even though she never learned to read or write, in some regards she more readily adapts to the new way of life.

In the end Nanapush and Margaret survive the best. They remain members of the Anishinaabe community. In fact, Nanapush, obviously a man of good standing, becomes chairman of the tribe. They are able to secure the return of Lulu from the boarding school, and

from the narrative, it becomes evident that Nanapush plays a strong parental role in her life. In addition, Margaret is able to keep her land, even if it is by underhanded means.

As can be seen, only the tricksters survive. Those who followed other paths towards the dark side of Anishinaabe religion or away from the embrace of the Anishinaabe people met with failure, here being described as loss of land, community, and children. So, why is it that the trickster endures when the world crumbles?

One reason human beings build worlds, according to Peter Berger, is to fend off chaos. I would argue this includes the chaos represented by PASS. Berger writes “nomos,” or established order, is a shield against terror, “Seen in the perspective of society, every nomos is an area of meaning carved out of a vast mass of meaninglessness, a small clearing of lucidity in a formless, dark, always ominous jungle” (24). As Susanne Langer has argued in another context, chaos is the one thing human beings cannot stand (287). The emphasis here is on the horror supposedly inherent outside of social control.

However, there is another approach to chaos as represented by the comic vision of the Anishinaabe (Gross). As discussed by Morreall, some of the characteristics of the comic vision include: a high tolerance for disorder, seeking out the unfamiliar, and a high tolerance for ambiguity (44–45). Stated another way, the trickster is comfortable with chaos. Thus, for the trickster, chaos is not just a thing of terror, as argued by Berger, or something that humans cannot tolerate, as Langer claims. Instead, chaos, to borrow from Rudolph Otto, becomes a *mysterious tremendum*, something which simultaneously attracts and repulses human beings (12–40). Another way to phrase this is that the trickster keeps the wall between social order and chaos permeable. Chaos, then, remains accessible to human beings; in addition to being a thing of terror, chaos also becomes a treasure trove of possibility to be accessed when need be.

Working from within the comic vision, the Anishinaabe writer Erdrich reinforces the above points with her trickster characters, Nanapush and Margaret. *Tracks* depicts the apocalypse of the Anishinaabe, the most horrible social nightmare possible, the collapse of

an entire world system. However, within the context of the chaos created by that apocalypse, the trickster figures find ways to not only adapt to changing realities, but actually to thrive in the new world order. Most especially, of all the people in the novel, Nanapush and Margaret are the ones who have the highest tolerance for disorder and ambiguity and the individuals who best keep their heads about them during very difficult times. One aspect of the trickster is that he lives by his wits. While other people were losing their wits, such as Fleur to anger, Pauline to Christ, Eli to love medicine, and other Indians to alcohol, Nanapush and Margaret remained clear-minded. It was their comfortability with chaos and their ability to access it to create new ways of being in the world that allowed Nanapush and Margaret to not only survive, but to thrive.

Speaking as an Anishinaabe, I see this as a very positive statement. The comic vision of the Anishinaabe still survives to this day; it is one of the hallmarks of the culture. Erdrich falls squarely within this tradition. Writing from within the culture, Erdrich demonstrates how, living with the comic vision, the Anishinaabe cannot only survive but thrive in chaos, and so build a new world, based on the old but responsive to the new. Far from being alienated, I see *Tracks* as a realistic portrayal of the Anishinaabe apocalypse and statement of hope for the future survival of our people.

NOTES

1. References to this novel will be cited parenthetically as *T*, with page numbers from the text.

2. Wenabozho is established by the Library of Congress as "Nanabush." However, this sacred being goes by numerous names, including Nanapush, Nanabozho, Manabush, Manabozho, and others. I use the name found in the dialect of my people, the Anishinaabe of the White Earth nation in northern Minnesota. It is, of course, to be noted that one of the central characters of *Tracks*, Nanapush, is named after the trickster.

3. Like Wenabozho, Michibizhii goes by various names as well, with two common variants being Messhepesu and Mishebesu.

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