

Magical Realism Revisited in Erdrich's *Tracks*: An Interactional Thick Inscription

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Abstract

This study revisits Louise Erdrich's practice of 'magic realism' to explain how the realistic presentation of unreal elements in Erdrich's writings differs from the western expression of magic realism. With the interactional thick inscription of Erdrich's magic realism, this study argues that the unreal events in Tracks are not based on Erdrich's imagination but the spiritual facts of her inheritance. Her description of natural-cum-supernatural elements cohesively achieves a synthesis of the Chippewa Anishinaabe magic-realistic world and, simultaneously, derives the social and cultural hierarchy of the Native American world. She appropriates the western concept of 'magic realism' to enlighten her oral tradition in 20th-century non-native societies. This appropriation explores the individuality of Native American traditional ways of being that have been considered cultural nonsense in modern academia. This interactional thick inscription of delimited text systematically inscribes the pre-Columbian context of 20th century Chippewa Anishinaabe, the Canadian border, and defines Erdrich's quest for her native identity.

Key Words:

Anishinaabe, Culture, Erdrich, Magic Realism, Myth, Oral Tradition.

Introduction

In post-Columbian times, Native American myths are interpreted from three viewpoints:

- i- Eurocentrism does not privilege the mythical stories of Native American literary and non-literary writings and marks them as absurd and far beyond reason;
- ii- Christianity, the forerunner of Eurocentrism, accepts the validity of the supernatural stories in Native American writings because of its own supernatural accounts. The objection to Native American supernatural stories would be the objection to biblical stories that are also supernatural. However, Native American supernatural practices, for Christianity, are not spiritual but satanic. For this reason, the Puritans in New England named Native Americans 'Philistines' supposed to be opponents of New Jerusalem and main hurdles in the process of civilization (Clements, 2004, p. 651);
- iii- The Native American point of view explains the historical and cultural significance of their mythology as it "narrates a sacred history and relates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings'" (Loftin, 1995, p. 680).

Hence, Native American mythology becomes a part of Native American historical narrative as there would be a role for the "imagination in myth making and in [historical] fiction writing" (Goodman, 1993, p. 73). This imagination can reflect a better sense of reality and at this cultural-historical level, the myth is useful (Boon & Schneider, 1974, p. 802). Euroamericans, however, mark Native American mythology as false because it relates to unusual historical happenings. They relate Native American myths of timeless time with the modern writing technique of magic realism, arguing that Native American writers through their magic realism shape the reality that is beyond the textual space and that raises the improbability of possibility (Wilson, 1983, p. 220). However, Louise Erdrich, Ojibwa, argues that the events people pick out as magical don't seem unreal to me. Unusual, yes, but I was raised believing in miracles and hearing of true events that may seem unbelievable. I think the term [magic realism] is one applied to writers from cultures more closely aligned to religious oddities and the natural and strange world. (Chavkin & Chavkin, 1994, p. 221)

This study argues that the basis of myths, magic, tricks or supernatural for the Euroamericans is the truth value culture for the aboriginal people of North American.

Literature Review

According to [Chavkin and Chavkin \(1994\)](#), contemporary Native American writers are accused of using magic realism to express the magical elements of their culture but these supernatural ways do not “seem unreal” (p. 221) to Native Americans as these *unreal* happenings are routine matters in their community. The understanding of the Native American oral tradition or mythology gives rise to conflict between Native American and Euro-American scholarship. Native American writers conceive mythology as inscribed-cultural-facts whereas Euro-American scholarship ignores this cultural significance of Native American oral tradition or mythology and admits the presentation of Native American myths as a magic realistic technique of expression. [Lorelei Cederstrom \(1982\)](#) argues that the mythical/magical stories in the works of Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday, Gerald Vizenor and Thomas King define the Native American traditional ways of being in a clear sense. For Cederstrom (1982), “[t]he best of these authors utilize ceremonial myth as a means of providing both structures to their novels and meaning to the lives of their protagonists” (p. 285). Cederstrom’s approach states that contemporary Native American literature is not thematically obsessed with the tendency for estrangement and despair since the gloomy settings of Native American stories show that Native American writers, as well as their story characters, are a nostalgic creation (p. xi). For Cederstrom (1982), such presentation of culture in Native American literature is not a cultural nostalgia but an effort to retrieve the Native American past (p. 285). This retrieval of the past is preceded by the ‘subjective conscious’ of the native people of the subaltern community and is about the social privilege of their culture as “from the opposite end of the white world a magical [native] culture was hailing” the victims ([Fanon, 2008](#), p. 93).

In this regard, [Alyssa Pleasant Caroline Wigginton and Kelly Wisecup. \(2018\)](#) condemn the texts written by non-Native writers in the early nineteenth century “for inaccurately portraying Native American” culture (p. 407). Sherman Joseph Alexie (2001) also lashes out at the non-native writers that present the Native American ways of being and claim the custodianship of aboriginal cultural representation. He claims that the non-native writers do not belong to the Native American ways of living, and therefore, are ignorant about Native American social and cultural norms. He accepts that the literature of a specific territory must represent its culture and only the native people of that territory can write that culture. He rejects the works of non-native writers like Barbara Kingsolver, Larry McMurtry, and Nadine Gordimer since they, being non-natives, cannot retrieve native cultural values with the argument that the works of these writers are deliberate contamination of the aboriginal culture. For him, “they’re outsider books. They’re colonial books ... These are books by members of the privileged, of the powerful, writing about the culture that has been colonized” ([Fraser, 2001](#), p. 60). Hence, he insists that Native American literature must be produced only by native or mixed-blood people of North America as they are the custodians of their cultural norms. Non-native scholars, on the other hand, do not have any direct concern, but just to research a new field of study, with the Native American culture. Christine Colasurdo (1997) argues that Native American writings are the most credible source of the study of Native American culture. She points out the bias of Euro-American writers while recording Native American social, cultural, and historical ways of living. She criticizes all those writings where a white writer writes the stories of a Native American’s life experience with the help of a mixed-blood translator ([Colasurdo, 1997](#), p. 385). Early American scholars visited Native American tribes with translators and noted down the life experience of the notable tribal figures. These autobiographical notes of Native American legends were published with white names. For Alexie and Colasurdo, these American scholars do not have any know-how of native languages and the culture of North America. Their scholarship is dependent on the experiences of native people, therefore, has no right to comment on Native American culture.

[David Murray \(1988\)](#) argues that the non-native scholars describe the so-called subjectivity of native people of North America who “became, ironically, objects of white attention, comprehended in all senses” (p. 34). Their studies, for Murray, stained the Native American social, cultural, and historical values; therefore, the Native American community consistently rejects their cultural presentation of the North American aboriginal societies. For instance, Native Americans, according to Chapman, do not accept Hyemeyohsts Storm’s *Seven Arrows* for its misrepresentation of Native American religious norms regarding its descriptions and references. The work becomes tarnished for twisting Native American religious values embedded in Native American culture and which Storm misrepresents as “more ... emotional than aesthetic” ([Chapman, 1975](#), p. 151). According to Chapman (1975),

Seven Arrows is exploitive not only because of its historical inaccuracies but because it takes profound religious symbols from native ceremonies – symbols which are full of power because they have not yet become trite – and turns them into banal allegories. Storm says that x stands for y, all mystery is explained, and all power is, thereby, lost. Many of the religious symbols which Storm discusses are Jungian archetypes, but their emotional impact is limited by Storm’s explications. (Cederstrom, 1975, p. 287)

Research Methodology

Deriving Norman K. Denzin's methodological insights of 'interactional thick inscription' this article explores within the field of Native American literature the ways whereby the Native American writers present social and cultural embedments of Native American social order. "[I]nteractional thick description", according to [Denzin \(1989\)](#) "focus[es] on interactions between two personas" (p. 110). This interaction reveals the nature of the relationship of two persons, groups, classes, and tribes in the present and future, and therefore, describes the nature of a community, society, or tribal world. This study applies interactional thick description to understand the nature of the Native American oral tradition inscribed in *Tracks* (1988). For instance, the strong interaction of Fleur Pillager with other families of Chippewa and with its surroundings explains Native Americans' matriarchal society and the people's affiliation with their land. This study focuses on how the Chippewa and Pillagers influenced each other as the absence of one weakens the other: when Fleur came back from Argus, "[t]hings hidden were free to walk" ([Erdrich, 1988](#), pp. 34, 35); and when the lumber company cleared the land, it made her leave the place. After the people learned of her departure, they accepted their decline ([Erdrich, 1988](#), p. 225). Also, the interaction of various medicine wo/men or common persons with each other or with animals and plants explain Anishinaabe ways of being. This type of thick inscription explores the interaction of the Native Americans with their surroundings, their ceremonies, and with other persons. These ways of thick inscriptions support each other and therefore, systematically organize the detail of Native American unusual history/historicity inscribed in *Tracks*.

Native American [Super] Natural World

Every primitive culture of the world has its own myths. The synchronic and diachronic study of these myths helps retrieve facts about that primitive culture. [Erdrich \(1988\)](#) knows this fact and textualizes Native American myths to explain the individuality of Native American culture concerning its oral tradition and to express cultural hybridity concerning Native American 20th-century social order. Her multifaceted description of acculturation underlines the cohesion of the Native American natural cum spiritual world. In *Tracks* (1988), she encompasses the culture of the Chippewa reservation from 1912 to 1924. The timeline explains the menace of the colonial regime and its impact on indigenous values to the native and mixed-blood characters of the Chippewa hybrid community. To express this duality of culture, Erdrich appropriates magic realism as a tool to explain the cohesion of the natural and supernatural factors of the Native American mystical world. Both the narrators of the story, Nanapush and Pauline, describe the synthesis of a (super)natural world wherein the natural and supernatural aspects act on the same levels ([Genette, 1988](#), p. 72). The novel unfolds the recollection of Nanapush, a veteran Anishinaabe, about the consumption epidemic that came with the intruders and resulted in the death of most of his family members and other neighbors in the winter of 1912. The realistic facts of the sickness of Anishinaabe are attached with the spiritual beliefs of deceased spirits and ghosts that resided in the woods, interspecies communication or transformation, the common Chippewa concept of three-day-death-road, and the meetings of the deceased with their dear ones or their revenge on their enemies. For example, the miserable death of the policeman Pukwan, according to Chippewa's beliefs, is due to his burning the deceased Pillagers. To incinerate Pillager homes, like the properties of others, although a government decree, overlooks the oral traditional ways of burying, especially those belonging to a sacred clan of Chippewa Anishinaabe: "He carefully nailed up the official quarantine sign, and then, without removing the bodies, he tried to burn down the house" ([Erdrich, 1988](#), p. 3) but could not do so. Nanapush, the protagonist, does not clarify how the Pillager cottage was spared, unlike the properties of others, from the fire that shows the indigenous people do not need any explanation regarding the sacredness of the Pillagers. The common belief was that the spirits of the deceased Pillagers saved their home and cursed the policeman Pukwan who "came home, crawled into bed, and took no food from that moment until his last breath passed" ([Erdrich, 1988](#), p. 4). Erdrich places different natural and supernatural events in such a chronological coherence that Pukwan's natural death precedes the supernatural effect of the Pillagers' curse. The narrative style is spontaneous as the integration of the natural and supernatural worlds is portrayed convincingly.

The best illustration of using magic realism is to define the spiritual ways of being of Fleur Pillager, the medicine woman of Chippewa Anishinaabe, and the last survivors among the Pillagers. She is described as the symbol of Chippewa Anishinaabe's diminishing culture. Like other natives, she had to sell her property but did not obey the order of the lumber company and stayed in her place. She was the last hope of the Chippewa Anishinaabe since they believed that the lumber company could not force the people to leave their home, so long as Fleur Pillager was there, according to the unwilling contracts that the lumber company enforced on the Chippewa. The community believed in her magical powers and related with Fleur, the company's various losses regarding the difficulties it faced and the enigmatic deaths of the workers: "One was killed that way when two oxen lurched

eagerly in their traces, and the wood fell from the unsecured hatch. A white man lost an eye when a splinter of wood spun off his axe. Two others perished, fallen from the lake barge” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 217). The nature of all these incidents about the sufferings or difficulties faced by the lumber company is causative, however, the timeline of the different happenings made the people, and unconsciously the readers, believe in the spirituality of the Native American clans like Pillagers.

There are various natural-cum-supernatural incidents in *Tracks* that explain the oral traditional belief system of Chippewa Anishinaabe. For example, the people believe in Fleur’s matrimonial relationship with the lake monster Misshepeshu and those who see them together in the lake would be punished. A common story that floated among the people was that at the age of fifteen Fleur was found lifeless beside the lake and George Many Woman, a native, dared to come to her “dull dead gray [body] ... [T]o look closer, he saw her chest move. Then her eyes spun open, clear black agate, and she looked at him. ‘You take my place [on Chippewa three-day-death-road],’ she hissed” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 11). So, according to the local beliefs, it became George Many Woman’s destiny that led him to the death-road instead of Fleur. The consequent death of George Many Woman sustains the local prophecy: in the “tin bathtub ... he slipped, got knocked out, and breathed water while his wife stood in the other room frying breakfast” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 11). Besides the event, whenever Fleur was rescued from drowning the rescuers, according to community beliefs, either died or disappeared. For instance, the people relate the story of two men who helped her at the lake, when she was a child: “The first wandered off and the other, Jean Hat, got himself run over by his own surveyor’s cart” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 10). The beliefs were common since Eli Kashpaw, Fleur’s husband, was also frighteningly suspicious about their coming child being born with “strange and fearful, bulging eyes, maybe with a split back tail” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 108). The description of the events for their chronological sequence makes the unreal real. Erdrich describes the spiritual powers of Fleur – her [super]natural affiliation with her surroundings, with the lake and the monster – in a way that makes the Chippewa community’s beliefs realistic. The consecutive connection of natural and supernatural happenings makes even the real entities unreal hence makes the oral traditional belief system of Chippewa Anishinaabe mysterious.

To explain Anishinaabe mystic nature Erdrich does not place the mysterious characters like Fleur Pillager or Moses Pillager as the protagonists of the novel and reveals them through the stories of Nanapush and Pauline Puyat. This technique of storytelling also describes the traditional oral storytelling of Chippewa Anishinaabe. They stayed quiet or barely spoke out the magical powers that made them more mysterious. Whatever readers come to know about their magical belonging to different events of spirits is based upon the community beliefs that are magical but realistic in the writer’s presentation. Erdrich does not describe supernatural things or actual spirits or deceased persons’ souls or some other mambo jumbo but describes what the Chippewa believe in. Noon of the Chippewa saw how Fleur punished Boy Lazarre but the community affirmed “that Fleur had caught Lazarre watching and tied him up, cut his tongue and, then sewn it in reverse” as a punishment for watching her secretly in the lake (Erdrich, 1988, p. 49). The prevailing oral traditional belief system also established that the hurricane in Argus, the workplace of Fleur, was actually Fleur’s curse to the three who raped her the night before for humiliating them by defeating the men in the card game. Hurricanes are not unreal but, subsequent events in the novel made the real thing like a hurricane into an unreal thing. Besides the havoc of the tornado, the city remains safe except for those two out of three who had raped Fleur. They take shelter in one of the freezers in the butcher’s storeroom that is accidentally locked from the outside. The butcher’s storeroom, their shelter, is not destroyed and their death apparently is an accident. But the people relate the event with the hurricane and imagine that the outer-lock of the freezer was wedged down as the outcome of the “tornado’s freak whim” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 30). The realistic presentation of unreal things does not require the explanation of how and why the two men were dead in the butcher’s meat freezer. The miserable condition of Dutch James, the unfortunate man who survived the havoc of the tornado, made people’s belief even more firm about the supernatural powers of Fleur: “Dutch James rotted in the bedroom, sawed away, piece by piece. First the doctor took one leg mostly off, then the other foot, an arm up to the elbow. His ears wilted off his head” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 62). This realistic approach to unreal beliefs explains and strengthens the oral traditional belief system of the Chippewa Anishinaabe.

In seasonal sickness, traditional medicines were commonly used by the Chippewa Anishinaabe. However, the people did not know “the plant’s configuration, even though its use was common enough for [various] problems” (Erdrich, 1988, pp. 132, 156). The community believed that only the medicine wo/men could have the access to the secrets of various plants and animals that the medicine wo/men shared with the community for healing purposes. In Native American tribes, healing is more like recovering one’s wholeness (Cohen, 2003, p. 307) or bringing back harmony with nature (Rybak et al., 2004, p. 26). Mostly the people used plant medicine or animal medicines for different ailments hence the plants or animals were regarded and respected in all tribes equally. And the medicine clans were also respected for their knowledge of different plants and animals. Fleur was regarded as the most

powerful medicine woman of the time since she knew the secrets powers of different plants: "Plant after plant! Some were shaped like a man's forked legs and some were rolled in balls. Some were wrapped tight in reeds and some strewn about, careless, gathered from the woods or shore or the bottom of the lake" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 156). This description of Chippewa Anishinaabe is realistic since human beings have been using plants or animals for different ailments since times immemorial. Medicine women in the novel are not presented as gods, and they have their weaknesses. Besides plant medicine, Fleur at one time herself was close to death and Nanapush requested Moses, the last Pillager after Fleur, for a *ceremony* — a rite performed to heal a serious sickness or for the re-possession of lost prosperity. Both Nanapush and Moses, according to the primitive tradition "*cut willows and shaped them into a frame for [the] tent of blankets and skins*" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 189, emphasis added). The performance of the ceremony is factual as all the objects – the willow tent, the medicine man and his dancing, and some sacred pollen of flowers – are natural and Erdrich does not present the appearance of a spirit as a result of Moses' ceremony to heal Fleur but the nature of the ceremony is magical as Fleur improves her condition.

The medicine wo/men had, as the Chippewa community believed, a close connection with plants, animals, and birds. There were other beliefs that these medicines wo/men could talk to them and acquire their shapes as well. Erdrich, in *Tracks* also explains the *interspecies communication and transformation* in realistic ways of expression. She does not describe any incident of people talking to animals, birds, or plants but defines the incidents in a chronological sequence to build up the minds of readers to explain Chippewa Anishinaabe's oral traditional belief system. For instance, Erdrich unfolds Moses' affection for cats as he is always found with them. The community believed him dead but he was "in the woods. Numb, ... as bears in a winter den" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 7). For their love for animals, birds, and plants, the community identified them with their connection to the specific plants and animals or birds. For instance, Moses for his love for cats could be found easily: [Nanapush] smelled the sharp, sour warmth of cats, and knew Moses had walked behind [him] and was hiding" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 221).

Erdrich describes Fleur's relationship with the animal world in a realistic way presenting the woman and animal on a similar level:

- 1) She describes Fleur's love for her surroundings and its creatures as she did not roam into the Chippewa or Argus;
- 2) Presents her with animal imagery;
- 3) And unfolds her magical power of interspecies communication and transformation through community beliefs.

Erdrich chronologically presents the natural-cum-supernatural events to make the mythical beliefs of Chippewa Anishinaabe sensible for non-native readers. In Argus, at the butcher's shop, when Fleur was boiling animals' heads her first glimpse is that of a water-goddess: she is dressed in a green robe that "drenched, wrapped her like a transparent sheet. A skin of lake weed. Black snarls of veining clung to her arms. Her braids were loose, half unraveled, tied behind her neck in a thick loop" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 22). In the next episode, during the fight with Lily, the one person out of the four who were going to rape her, turns the image of the water-goddess into the image of an animal. The man treats her as a butcher treats an animal and her response was that of an enraged animal as woman and animal absorbed in one body (Erdrich, 1988, p. 26).

Erdrich describes Fleur as a goddess and animal in a symbolic reality and then comes to her imagined affiliation with wolves or bears. In Chippewa Anishinaabe, the people believed in her real conversion into a bear. There were various stories about how the tracks of her bare feet "changed, where the claws sprang out the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt. By night [they] heard her chuffing cough, the bear cough" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 12). Moreover, the appearance at the birth of her first baby Lulu strengthened the community beliefs: "the bear heard Fleur calling, and answered ... drew up and sat on her haunches like a dog" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 59, emphasis added). Her appearance was a tension for Margaret and Nanapush but it left after Lulu's birth. Erdrich presents the situation though not as magical as the presence of the bear established a real state of unease as the animal could be injurious to Nanapush, Margaret, and Fleur and mainly to the newly born child. However, it did not hurt any of them and disappeared, so they believed it to be a spirit bear.

Conclusion

Erdrich, 1988 uses the modern technique of magic realism to describe the coexistence of natural and supernatural elements in Chippewa Anishinaabe to make up the mind of the modern reader in conceiving the spiritual society and hence publicize the Native American unusual ways of being. She presents Native American myths as the authentic version of Native American social and cultural embedments. In this regard, she textualizes two different worlds of Native American spiritual culture and does not narrate them in isolation since they are interconnected. Also, the fusion of natural and supernatural elements in Native American society cannot be perceived separately

due to their strong correlation. Her narratives of Chippewa Anishinaabe's magical realities and tricksters – spirits and anthropomorphic animals that go against the common laws of nature – incorporate the Native American past, present, and expected future and define the sequence of Native American ceremonial life. The Anishinaabe beliefs in medicine men and women who know the secret power of the world of surrounding nature help people in various ailments and future happenings, vision quests, interspatial communication and transformation, and intrapersonal communication, at the same time explaining why they are unacceptable in the modern world but the ultimate truth for the Native Americans, especially the Chippewa.

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