

Louise Erdrich and the Quest for a Cross-Cultural Identity

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to explore, by the means of cultural studies which is a theoretical approach avowedly and even radically interdisciplinary, the many instances in the novels of Louise Erdrich in which the author seems to be creating interconnectedness between cultures rather than emphasizing the dividing lines. Indeed, based on the assumptions of biculturalism and cross-culturalism, the works of Louise Erdrich aim at discussing how the writer succeeds in connecting the cultures of the white and the Ojibwe formerly presented as antagonistic. In this perspective, our work addresses the questions of the transgression of the boundaries between western and Native Americans' values, beliefs and culture through the depiction of the experiences of several characters with mixed identities.

Keywords

Cultural-Interconnectedness, Biculturalism, Cross-Culturalism, Ojibwe, Transgression

1. Introduction

Most native writers such as Louise Erdrich, Sherman Joseph Siko, James Welch, Simon J Ortiz and many others implicitly or explicitly depict the American period of time during which the United States government implemented policies that subtly force the assimilation of their communities within its borders. Among other communities merged into this cultural mosaic that characterizes America, the Ojibwe tribe is struggling not to extinction. Louise Erdrich, born into this tribe on the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation in North Dakota, writes to reinvent the torn memory of this community who lives on the rubble of a mythical past. She represents the voice of a forgotten America, one that dances with the wolves on the now-sacred territories of Indian memory. These policies

outlined previously entail the existence of a pluralistic of cultural backgrounds citizens on its soil. Many recent novels explore transcultural connections and point to the instability of ethnic and national identities by tracing affinities (including transatlantic ones) between people beyond culture, ethnicity, and nationality (Georgi-Findlay, 1998). The fostering of the multiculturalism prompted in this statement encounters the assent of Louise Erdrich who chose to seriously challenge the comfortable idea of the “pure Indian” by focusing on the cross-cultural identity. Erdrich clearly addresses the matter of the dynamics of biculturalism and cross-culturalism in her novels. These novels we are referring to are entitled: *Tracks* (1988) showcases the tension between traditional Anishinaabe culture and beliefs and the Westernizing influence of white, Christian America; *Love Medicine* (1993) is about the enduring verities of loving and surviving. it stares more boldly at many of the truths of Native American life in America; *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001) captures the essence of a time and the spirit of a woman who felt compelled by her beliefs to serve her people as a priest. In particular, it focuses on miracles, crises of faith, struggles with good and evil, temptation, and the corrosive and redemptive power of secrecy; *The Round House* (2012) tells the story of a boy on the cusp of manhood who seeks justice and understanding in the wake of a terrible crime that upends and forever transforms his family, society and culture.

If each of these works reveals a particular dimension of the issues of biculturalism and cross-culturalism, it should be noted, however, that these novels give a common prism to these topics that a pluralistic theoretical approach primarily anchored to Cultural studies could help to better figure out. Indeed, based on the assumption of interconnectedness, this work aims at discussing how Louise Erdrich succeeds in connecting two different cultures formerly presented as antagonistic. Better, this entry addresses the questions of the transgression of the boundaries between western and Indians’ values, beliefs and culture through the depiction of the experiences of several characters with mixed identities. It is effectively in order to make this transgression more legible that we have based our work on analyzing Louis Erdrich’s quest for a syncretic Spiritual society firstly, then explain also how she questions the immutability of gender boundaries in her novels, and finally find out the way she handles cross-cultural image to render this transgression.

2. A Lookup for a Syncretic Spiritual Society with Erdrich

The most appropriate and logical personification of Christians in relation to the Natives are missionaries, priests and nun who work in direct contact with them. As many Native writers, Erdrich uses such religious characters in her works. She mostly uses nuns and priests. She has been guided by her grandfather who she often refers to as her religious role model to portray characters like Father Damien either in *Tracks* or in *Last Report*. This character appears as someone who, “had a mixture of old time and church religion (...) he would do pipe ceremo-

nies for ordinations and things like that. He just had a grasp on both religions” (Howard, 2000: p. 110).

In *Tracks* and *Last Report*, Father Damien redeems the church considerably. Thanks to him, the church on reservations has become more tolerant, and many priests engaged in the campaign for Indian rights. The devotion of Father Damien to the Native community is so acute that in the first chapter of *Tracks*, he steps in to replace the priest who succumbed to the same devastation as his flock in the middle of a rampant epidemic. Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that Father Damien is a white priest character. In the same spirit of his devotion to the Native community, he rescued Nanapush and Fleur from yielding to the deadly interaction with the spirits of the dead which were so near that at length they just stopped talking. Nanapush confesses it through, “But one day the new priest, just a boy really, opened the door. A dazzling and painful light flooded through and surrounded Fleur and me” (Erdrich, 2001: p. 58). Father Damien displays a less oppressive aspect of religion opposite to those priests who used Christianity to persecute the Natives. In *Tracks*, when Fleur sets foot in Argus for the first time, she primarily visits Father Damien to get a job, “Fleur Pillager returned and the first place she went once she came into town was to the back door of the priest’s residence attached to the landmark church” (Erdrich, 1988: p. 13). Furthermore, Father Damien also financially contributes to rescue Indian’s allotment as it appears in these words, “he added the final quarter from his own pocket” (Erdrich, 1988: p. 191). That is the reason why Nanapush refers to him as “our friend Father Damien” (Erdrich, 1988: p. 61). In one way or another, Father Damien wanders between Indian and white worlds creating a syncretic spiritual society where a narrow-minded Catholicism has no chance to prosper (Howard, 2000: p. 118).

Just as in *Tracks*, Father Damien represents a complete spiritual syncretism in the *Last Report* as well. In this novel, Father Damien does not present the Chipewewa religion and the Christianity as priori opposing or competing. Instead, like *Tracks*, the novel reconciliates both religions.

More importantly, the numerous actions of Father Damien in support of the Native help to destabilize the order prescribed by the Christianity. For instance, while dutifully observing liturgical practices, he, nevertheless incorporates Fleur’s medicine into this daily routine. Besides, Father Damien while preaching with western words, he uses the Native ones as we can see in this quotation:

He preferred the Ojibwe word for praying, anama’ay, with its sense of a great motion upward. He began to address the trinity as four and to include the spirit of each direction—those who sat at the four corners of the earth. Whenever he prayed, he made of herself a temporary center of those directions (Erdrich, 2001: p. 96).

Progressively, Father Damien articulates both Catholic and traditionalist behaviours. He recognizes that the Ojibwe are engaged in the ordinary as well as esoteric forms of worship which are even compatible with the teachings of Chr-

ist. It is on the basis of this interconnectedness that Father Damien aims to reach that he started correspondence with pope. Unfortunately, he will be hampered in its momentum by the attitude of the Pope. Indeed, after decades of a one-sided correspondence with pope, he did not receive reply from the Vatican. So that he starts doubting the Christian universal truth. He confesses it in these words, “one couldn’t hope for a reply, oh no that be all too human” (Erdrich, 2001: p. 3). He concludes that it is in the Chippewa community that he will find this humanity and understanding. Thus, he fully integrates into the Chippewa culture, assimilates the new cultural beliefs and religion practices, and forms bonds with Chippewa families in the reservation. Father Damien thereby illustrates this statement which claims that, “hybridity is precisely about the fact when a new situation, a new alliance formulates itself, it may demand that you should translate your principles, rethink them, extend them” (Bhabha, 1994: p. 216). Father Damien becomes a righteous member of the Chippewa community. He is transformed from the Western Other into a Chippewa self. The missionary becomes the convert. Father Damien changes his perceptions, he adopts a lifestyle which eliminates homogeneity and calls for heterogeneity. However, this state does not make him forget about his catholic roots which shows the “in-between” life he experiences akin to June Kashpaw in *Love Medicine*.

Indeed, being the first person the reader is introduced to in the novel the representation of June Kashpaw is construed as a spiritual syncretism that points some similarities in Christianity and the religion of the Native. The novel draws a parallel between the effects of June's death on her fellow human beings and those of Christ in the Bible. Indeed, it is in this perspective that he will figure throughout the novel as a touchstone for the other characters (Howard, 2000: p. 121). Cleverly, Louise Erdrich succeeds in applying the biblical pattern in Native context. The biblical miracle of Christ walking on water is alluded in the depiction of June journeying homeward, “The snow fell deeper that Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home” (Erdrich, 1993: p. 7). The phrase “walked over it like water” implies that June is like Christ who walked on water according to the Bible. Given all the obvious Christian reference, one might feel the urge to consider June as a Christ like figure, one who has been sacrificed to the sins of history” (Stookey, 1999).

The Christ-like feature of June also appears in the opening scene of *Love Medicine* which takes place on Easter Week-end, when June undertakes the last homecoming. Easter Week-end refers to the moment when Jesus Christ died and came back to life, and the last homecoming refers to her death as June attempts to walk home during a snowstorm in the night to Easter Sunday. This moment in the story is overflowing with images and symbols that allude to the death of the Christ and his resurrection. As well the imagery in the scene of June's homecoming offers references to Easter combining with the feeling of June that she is going “underwater.” This scene is alluding to the historic Chippewa legend of the water deity who brings death. It is also the opportunity to

point out that going underwater means death for the Chippewa. As a result, the story of June appears as a combination of Christian and Chippewa mythology which breaks the boundaries of religion as we can also see in the behavior of Lipsha, the son of June.

Indeed, like in the portrayal of his mother's liminal spirituality, Lipsha exists in a state of in-betweenness. He is caught between traditional Native beliefs and the pervasive Christianity on the reservation. The narrator Albertine, who is close to Lipsha, notices how the latter is caught between the two states of being when she describes him as "being both ways" (Erdrich, 1993: p. 36). As matter of fact, Louise Erdrich states that, "Lipsha is born with the shaman's healing touch". He has inherited a special gift from his ancestors, which he calls the touch. He can relieve physical suffering by laying his hand on people; he confesses, "the medicine flows out of me" (Erdrich, 1993: p. 231). However, this ancestral heritage does not obscure the fact that Lipsha is influenced by his Catholic upbringing, as well. This Christian education is symbolized by the Cree rosary beads given to him by his grandmother Marie. Thus, equipped with a mixed education, he gains some benefit from his knowledge of both religions. Erdrich argues that, "He can easily combine the two religious' systems" (Erdrich, 1993: p. 157). This would imply that he neither completely abandons his native faith, nor refuses to accept change. The inability of Lipsha to claim one belief system over another is perceived when Marie asks him to make a love medicine for her; It means that Marie urges Lipsha to rekindle the love between her and Nector. Mindful that he lacks the knowledge required to fully understand the old Chippewa speciality is being asked, Lipsha compensates this lack about traditional shamanic practices with Catholicism. Then he takes the love medicine to be blessed by a priest, who refuses, and by a nun at the convent who refuses too. Faced with these various refusals, Lipsha dips his fingers in holy water and blesses the love medicine "with his (own) hand" (Erdrich, 1993: p. 205). It is obvious that Lipsha uses cunningly both religions practices to balance what he wants to obtain.

In light of the way June and Lipsha synthesize the practices in these two religions in *Love Medicine*, we notice that the cleric crossbreed process leads to a third space, where the natives are able to refuse "to wholly condemn the Christian or the traditional" and instead, embraces a hybridization of the two religious worlds" (Howard, 2000: p. 128).

Modelled after June Kashpaw, Marie offers a perspective that bring together the two religions. In fact, Marie's appearances in *Love Medicine* also reveal the twofold reliance on both the Catholic and the Chippewa religions. For instance, in the chapter entitled Saint Marie, she is presented as a "reservation girl" who strongly desires to enter a sister convent at the age of fourteen. She introduces herself as a girl who "had ever prayed so hard" (Erdrich, 1993: p. 43), "a girl from this reservation as a saint (the sisters of the convent)'d have to kneel to" (Erdrich, 1993: p. 43). So in the Chippewa community she is known for going to

church, she states that, “I had the mail-order Catholic soul you get in a girl raised out in the bush, whose only thought is getting into town” (Erdrich, 1993: p. 44). Later on she provides her children with a Christian upbringing. Moreover, at the most difficult moments of her life, such as when she finds out that her husband had left her, it is within the Christian framework that Marie seek solace.

Nevertheless, the attempt of Marie to embrace catholic wholesale at the expense of discarding her Chippewa background proves to be impossible. This failure is the outcome of a series of disappointment connected to Catholicism and at the core of which is Sister Leopolda, the nun who takes on her monitoring. Though, instead of switching from the Chippewa religious code to the Western, it is the blending of the two religions that ultimately defines her.

Indeed, Marie’s amalgamation of religions becomes visible through a symbolic object, namely the chain of beads that she takes from June Morrissey’s neck upon welcoming her into her family (Harper, 2012: pp. 17-38). It should be noted that, with a few differences that can be observed, the practice of the rosary is the prerogative of these two cultures. From this perspective Marie associates those beads with Native belief, as well as Catholicism. Marie initially calls the beads a rosary, which is also how her grandson Lipsha refers to them. Marie reinforces the connection between the beads and Catholicism when claiming that the chain substitutes the act of praying for her, “I don’t pray, but sometimes I do touch the beads...I never look at them, just let my fingers roam to them when no one is in the house” (Erdrich, 1993: p. 96). This passage expresses Marie’s connection to Catholic practices despite the fact she displays a strong belief in the Chippewa spirituality. The beads become the epitome of Marie’s simultaneous reliance on the elements of both religions. Above all, the symbol of the beads bridges the two religious frames of reference which traverse in Marie’s figure, revealing Marie’s awareness of her own liminality” (Harper, 2012: p. 31). Thus, the beads illustrate the bicultural identity of Marie and also they demonstrate the permeability of the two understandings.

As proved with the previous characters, Louise Erdrich offers with the religious experience of Pauline Puyat in *Tracks* the solution of a perspective that brings together the Catholic and Chippewa religions. A daughter of a mixed-blood father and half-white mother, Pauline Puyat is confronted at her early age with Catholicism and decides to become a nun, as she confesses it here, “I was chosen to serve” (Erdrich, 1988: p. 137).

However, despite her deep belief in Christian God, Pauline continues to see the world in her Chippewa spiritual terms. That is why she is depicted as, “covertly syncretic” and “Like most converts, Pauline retains many aspects of the religion she attempts to leave behind as ‘pagan’” (Howard, 2000: pp. 114-116). She keeps on believing in shape changing, one of the tenets of Chippewa religion. Before Pauline and Napoleon, Morrissey clashed in a merciless battle, she is convinced that Mishupeshu, the lake monster enters the body of Napoleon as

she describes it here, “He had appeared to me as the water thing, glass breastplate and burning iron rings” (Erdrich, 1988: p. 203). Also, this quote confirms the vision of Pauline during the wrestling:

I kicked and kicked away the husk, drove it before me with the blows of my feet. A light begins to open in the sky and the thing grew a human shape, one that I recognized in gradual stages. Eventually, it took on the physical form of Napoleon Morrissey (Erdrich, 1988: p. 207).

While killing Napoleon, Pauline even describes herself as having taken the form of kokoko, the Owl, “I snapped him in my beak like a wicket-boned mouse” (Erdrich, 1988: p. 73). This shape changing and association to the Owl allow to understand that Pauline believes in Manitous or spirits. These spirits function as both good and evil forces in Chippewa daily life. Therefore, it is not surprising to see Pauline as a nun “addressing different Manitous alongside with Blessed Virgin and Her heart” (Howard, 2000: p. 122).

As she is tenuously connected to her Indian beliefs, Pauline regarded herself as one chosen to sacrifice her health after the example of Christ crucifixion; for the advantage of the church and the general good of her people (Howard, 2000: p. 123). It means she uses white religion for the welfare of Indians. That is why Pauline is perceived by others as a “savior.... a creature of impossible contradictions” (Howard, 2000: p. 123).

In the perspective of Friedman, we can assert that Pauline Puyat despite being a nun, she is deeply implicated in the framework of her Chippewa heritage. By weaving Indian and western beliefs, and because she does not adhere to limiting definition of religion, Pauline Puyat is revealed to be a religious syncretic character.

3. Questioning the Immutability of Gender Boundaries in Erdrich's Novels

The unjustifiable inequalities that exist between women and men is based neither on sex nor nature; it is pure historical constructs (Rosenthal, 2003). To that extent, Erdrich tries to challenge those inequalities by the means of her female or male characters who are viewed by Caroline Rosenthal as having a mixture of gender roles and behaviors. In the works of Erdrich, not only female characters challenge the stereotypical view of women, but male characters also transgress gender barriers by taking on the characteristics of females. It is with this in mind that Erdrich attempts to break down her readers' notions of traditional gender roles by creating characters who crossover traditional gender role (Rosenthal, 2003). For example, in *Love Medicine*, Marie Kashpaw defies male supremacy by proving that being a woman is not limited to the role of childbearing. Better, she tells anyone who will listen that she is the driving force behind the prominence of her husband, Nector Kashpaw. She leads him, and she proudly declares it, “he is what he is because (she) made him” (Erdrich, 1993: p. 154). She adds that she “had decided...to make him into something big in this reservation” (Erdrich,

1993: p. 189). It is clear that the behavior of Marie contradicts this patriarchal view of the wife where women are expected to take care of children only. Marie upset the gender role in the novel of Erdrich when she “take money from Nector Kashpaw’s hand that was lighting on the bar. (She)’d leave him nothing. He’d have to come home and beg when he needed more” (Erdrich, 1993: p. 86). When also she “kept him from the bottle...dragged him back each time he drank and tied him to bed with strong ropes” (Erdrich, 1993: p. 89).

The ability of Marie to transcend gender binary is seen also through the subversion of western families’ structure where a family is supposed to be composed of biological children only. For Native Americans, the family is not only the key factor of traditional tribal identification, but it is also a network of relations transcending borders. That is why she is seen as “both a biological and adoptive mother” (Erdrich, 1993: p. 131). Despite her large family to be raised, she accepts two adoptees: June and Lipsha. Marie loves her two adoptees unconditionally and treats them like her own. Through her actions, she disregards the principle of biological kinship fundamental to Western family structure.

As matter of fact, the act of raising large family is imbued with significance in Native American tradition. It is an effective response against extinction and cultural loss (Sanders, 1998: p. 142). Marie in *Love Medicine* eloquently plays this role of bringing children together whatever their social, religious and cultural backgrounds.

Like Marie in *Love Medicine*, Geraldine Coutts is a Chippewa woman in the novel *Round House* who has been raped by a white man at the beginning of the novel. Because she is a Native American woman, violence on her is highly symbolic. This rape can be construed as a weapon which aims at destroying Native American societies, as women represent the core value of Indian culture.

However, Geraldine Coutts endures the brunt of this trauma, as she resists the efforts of men to impose their will on women, to claim woman as the objects of men, their desire or to define for women the condition of their being. She leaves the hospital and resumes her daily activities as usual. This way she proves that she is fine and brave, “I’m all right..... Look at me. See?” (Erdrich, 2012: p. 3). Geraldine is aware that she constitutes the beam of her family, so that according to the narrative, “her absence stopped the time” (Erdrich, 2012: p.3). Without Geraldine, her son and her husband are seriously disturbed. And her son Joe as a narrator confirms it through, “women don’t realize how much store men set on the regularity of their habits. We absorb their comings and goings into our bodies, their rhythms into our bones” (Erdrich, 2012: p. 3). The fighting spirit of Geraldine Coutts has strengthened solidarity among women of the community (Stokey, 1999). A community where women like Fleur Pillager always defies traditions of masculine authority. Clearly in *Tracks*, this character appears as doubtlessly the chief figure of female mixed-gender character:

Fleur is one of the most distinctive female characters in Native American fiction, because she breaks the boundaries between male and female. In

other words, Fleur challenge(s) conventions or traditions that circumscribe the choices available to women (Erdrich, 1988: p. 141).

Fleur is engaged in different activities normally associated with the masculine. With Fleur, Erdrich subverts (this) rigidity of patriarchal taxonomy (Rosenthal, 2003). Thus, Fleur serves as a potent healer in addition to be a hunter. The gender lines are also blurred by Erdrich when she presents Fleur playing cards with men, knowing that, “women didn’t usually play with men” (Erdrich, 1988: p. 18). She is so talented that she constantly beats men, who cannot hide that they are, “shock of surprise” (Erdrich, 1988: p. 18). The government is also shock of surprise when it notices that Fleur fights fiercely to keep the land of her ancestors. She rejects the government decision to take her land, “she said the paper had no bearing or sense, as no one would be reckless enough to try collecting for land where Pillagers were buried” (Erdrich, 1988: p. 172). Fleur’s heroism goes further when she does not accept government commodities, although her community has nothing to eat, “The day the rations arrived, we knew that one of us would have to go into town and register for food with the Agent, and nobody moved” (Erdrich, 1988: p. 174).

Fleur openly opposes to meet western society’s standards. She clearly reclaims the true status of Native American women like Lulu Nanapush in *Love Medicine*. Indeed, in this novel, Lulu challenges the traditional construction of femininity by breaking free of westernized norms that have impacted Indian culture. For instance, she subverts the western nuclear family by having illegitimate children with different men. She admits that:

There were eight of them. Some of them even had her maiden name. The three oldest were Nanapush. The next oldest were Morrisseys who took the name Lamartine, and then there were more assorted younger Lamartines who didn’t look like one another either (Erdrich, 1993: p. 109).

Having multiple sexual partners is something prohibited by patriarchal system, but Lulu transcends this judgment. Lulu makes love with Moses Pillager, the cousin of her mother and gives birth to a son. She even has a child with Beverly, the brother of her deceased husband Henry, “When Henry’s brother Beverly comes for the funeral, he and lulu make” (Erdrich, 1993: p. 112).

Lulu is sexually uninhibited, this is why on the reservation she is regarded as a slut and called the “heartless, shameless man-chaser” (Erdrich, 1993: p. 277); She is also named “the seductive mother” (Smith, 1991). But Lulu transcends these judgments. She does not blame herself or feel sorry for her actions. She is not disempowered by her community’s gossip.

Yet, Lulu does not dedicate herself exclusively to unconventional love affairs; she has leadership skills. Her son Lyman Lamartine, with the help of Lulu becomes the head of the Tomahawk Factory. Lulu guides Lyman on how to run the establishment smoothly and make the workers and community satisfied. She helps him figure out how to offer and spread jobs equally to families on the res-

ervation and quickly establish equal pay. In addition to her leadership skills, Lulu is politically involved in a woman's rights activism. So that, when the tribe wants to take her land for factory they want to build, Lulu is not going to stand idle (Smith, 1991).

In her fight to try and stay on her land and her continuation to fight back against the oppressor, it is obvious that Lulu is breaking up the unjust pattern of the historical reputation Native Women have been given and contradicts the preconceived assumptions that, "that a woman is not supposed to assume a male position" (Smith, 1991).

With Lulu we realize that the androcentrism which favors men over women is challenged, and completely lost as we can also notice in *The Last Report* with Agnes De Witt.

Indeed, Agnes is a woman who disguised herself as a priest called Father Damien. The latter on his way to the Objive reservation, is unfortunately taken away by a flood and dies. So, Agnes who finds out his dead body, adopts his disguise and identity. She puts on the original robe of Father Damien and keeps it for the rest of her life:

It was nearly twilight before she rolled him in her heavy night-gown was his shroud. His clothing, his cassock, and the small bundle tangled about him, a traveler's pouch tied underneath all else, Agnes put on in the exact order he had worn them (Erdrich, 2001: p. 44).

Through this "shape-shifting" (Stokey, 1999), Agnes defies the western constructs of gender based on the Catholic principle which stipulates that, "a woman cannot be a priest" (Howard, 2000: p. 120). Agnes transforms herself each morning with a feeling of loss that she finally defines as the loss of Agnes.

However, despite her huge efforts to give up her nature as a woman, Agnes is still known by the people for her "girlish earnestness" and noticed as an "unmanly priest" (Erdrich, 2001: p. 88). This is aptly illustrated through the reaction of a fellow priest, Juder Miller who, "saw, inhabiting the same cassock as the priest, an old woman. She was a sly, pleasant contradictory-looking female of stark intelligence. He shook his head, craned forward, but no, there was Father Damien again, tottering into the comfort of his room." (Erdrich, 2001: p. 139).

Furthermore, the non-binary thinking is made clear that, "the use of both masculine and feminine pronouns when referring to Agnes highlights the way in which Damien and Agnes exist as separate people dwelling in the same body" (Rosenthal, 2003). In other words, the use of "he" and "she" to depict Agnes in the text suggests her transgending according to Rosenthal. In the quotation, Agnes is depicted as both a man and a woman, since her process of transgending is not replacing one gender for another, but acknowledging that both comprise her identity.

In addition, the transformation of Agnes reveals the privileged position that men possess in a patriarchal system. So, Agnes argues that, "she realizes quickly what it feels like not to be subordinated" (Erdrich, 2001: p. 30). Because, there

are things that she easily gets or does as a man. For instance, being treated with much more respect. Indeed, as a man Agnes found that Father Damien was free to pursue all questions with frankness and ease. Something that was impossible or denied in her former life.

For sexual relationship, Agnes unfortunately reveals her true nature to Father Gregory Wekkle, a fellow priest sent by the Vatican to assist her. From that time, he starts treating her as “somehow less” (Erdrich, 2001: p. 103), as an inferior being, “there was another thing: that tone in his voice when they were alone. An indulgent tone, frankly anticipating some lesser capacity in her—whether intellectual, moral, or spiritual, she could not say” (Erdrich, 2001: p. 103). As we can notice, Father Gregory emphasizes his Western conception of womanhood in these words: “you’re a woman (...) a woman cannot be priest” (Erdrich, 2001: p. 106). As a response to the allegation of Gregory, Agnes utters this, “I’m a priest (...) I am nothing but a priest” (Erdrich, 2001: p. 107). These words are an appeal to consider her existence beyond gender barriers.

The case of Agnes favors another analysis of the concept of feminism in the perception of Louise Erdrich. In fact, with her characters, Louise Erdrich discloses that the feminist concept that claims the fluidity of gender is also related to men. Observing her male characters nurturing offspring and rearing childlike, “They deconstruct gender norms” (Rosenthal, 2003). It is clear that the whole philosophy is based on the fact that, “Tasks distributes according to biological determinants are not always viable” (Rosenthal, 2003). As a matter of fact, it is in the perspective of Rosenthal that Erdrich challenges gender categories by endowing male characters with some characteristics generally attributed to women. So to substantiate our comments on this case, we have arbitrarily chosen one male character among many others who manifest these female traits in the works of Louise Erdrich. This character is Nanapush in *Tracks*.

Indeed, we notice that this character explores the fluidity of gender by taking care of characters named: Fleur and Lulu. Nanapush was in some ways the book’s most maternal character. He wondered wistfully how it feels to be a woman, tended Fleur, brooded over Lulu’s delivery, agreed to rear her, and gave her long monologues of advice (Rosenthal, 2003).

At the very beginning of the novel, Nanapush discovers Fleur who is helpless, “Fleur... was so feverish that she’d thrown off her covers, and now she huddled against the cold wood range, staring and shaking” (Erdrich, 1988: p. 3). Despite the fact that he is a man, he provides her with assistance, “I was the one who struggled to lash her to the sacks of supplies and to the boards of the sled. I wrapped more blankets over her and tied them down as well” (Erdrich, 1988: p. 3). He treats her with great care. Since Nanapush’s “own family was wiped out one by one, leaving only Nanapush” (Erdrich, 1988: p. 2). He calls her “daughter” (Erdrich, 1988: p. 38).

Like Fleur, Nanapush adopts her daughter Lulu. He becomes both a father and a mother for her. In fact, Lulu’s father is unknown and she is abandoned by her biological mother. So again, Nanapush acts as her mother, by giving her ad-

vice, telling her stories as grandmothers do in Native American tradition.

Actually, by choosing Lulu as his audience while telling his stories, and by regarding Fleur as “the funnel of (his tribe’s) history”, Nanapush is resisting patriarchy and longs for the praising of gynocracies defined as “woman-centered tribal societies in which matrilocality, matrifocality, matrilinearity, maternal control of household goods and resources are present and active features of traditional tribal life” (Beidler & Barton, 1999: p. 235).

With the example of Nanapush, who is representative of the characters of the kind, we can see in the novels of Louise Erdrich that the imposition of borders, especially as they relate to gender can be overthrown by human beings. In her play with gender, Erdrich is attempting to break down her reads notions of traditional gender roles by creating characters who crossover and through tradition gender definitions (Rosenthal, 2003). It becomes obvious that through her character, Erdrich seeks to redresses the imbalance of power that has traditionally divided the genders. And also, by the means of Nanapush, she investigates the concern of gender binaries transgression.

4. Cross-Cultural Image

Creating cross-cultural figures based on the lore of her Native American and German immigrant origins, Erdrich blends the seemingly opposed cultures into a mixed form. It is in this same spirit that she questions the construction of a culturally pure identity in her novels.

In *Tracks* for example Nanapush, who is a tribal head of the past, tries to bring the cosmogony of the Native back to life through short stories that he acknowledges to the members of the community. In spite of his strong attachment to his Indian culture, he knows more about the connection between White and Indian culture. With this knowledge, he takes advantage of this situation, that he expresses here, “There were so few of us who even understood the writing on the papers. Some signed their land away with thumbs and crosses. As a young man, I had made my reputation as a government interpreter” (Erdrich, 1988: pp. 99-100).

Nanapush also benefits from a Jesuit education to have an excellent command of English language. This mastering of the colonizer’s language enables him to ensure his community’s survival, to save his people from the government misdeeds; it also reveals Nanapush’s ability to accept the new and the old (...) guarantees his survival (Stookey, 1999). It is clear that for Nanapush, the survival of its community remains a priority. It is in this perspective that he claims the white priest Damien as the friend of his people. It is in this regard that during the baptism of Lulu that Nanapush complies with this Christian ritual out of politeness. He finds no drawbacks in it; Nanapush reclaims his adhesion to cultural coexistence. It is also in the name of this adherence to cultural coexistence that Nanapush deepens his relationship with Father Damien when taught him how to make bear paw snowshoe frames and lace them with moose guts and sinew and

how to build a brush shelter to conserve the heat. His attitude towards Father Damien testifies both to the greatness of his heart and especially to the way he made his own the cultural values advocated by his tribe.

In view of the quality of the friendship that binds Nanapush and Father Damien, we can see that contradictory elements can coexist without the need to eliminate one another (Howard, 2000: p. 117). The life of Nanapush demonstrates obviously that the two cultures can get along harmoniously, as we can also notice in the life of Albertine Johnson in *Love Medicine*.

Indeed, Albertine is the only child of an Indian mother Zelda and a white Swedish father Johnson. As such, she appears as “one-half Swedish” and “approximately one-quarter Chippewa” (Sanders, 1998: p. 149). This dual cultural belonging, leads Albertine to display marks of blending two cultural components: white and Indian ways of life and values. This illustrates the notion of living “in-between” space which is about living in-between two cultures (Bhabha, 1994). It implies that persons who have lived in more than one culture or who straddles two or more culture are hybrids (Bhabha, 1994). This is what we find at Albertine who has discovered through this “in-between” space a new cultural way to survive. She adopts some cultural practices of the host culture while keeping her cultural tradition and customs. She finds it hard to get over them, for she considers herself a part of the Indian community, even though her father is white.

Obviously, the attachment of Albertine to her Indian culture does not overshadow her white ways and manners. Indeed, as well as being traditional, she is also westernized. She is opposed to having children before completing her education. Her opinion does not change, even when her mother complains, “At this rate, I’ll be old and stiff to take care of my own grandchildren” (Erdrich, 1993: p. 15). For Albertine, education comes first, not marriage. This is why when her mother puts her the following question: “Have you met any marriageable boys in Fargo yet?” (Erdrich, 1993: p. 14). Albertine “shook (her) head no” (Erdrich, 1993: p. 14) and responds in these words: “I’m not interested anyway; I’ve got other things to do” (Erdrich, 1993: p. 15). For her, “marriage’s not the answer to it all” (Erdrich, 1993: p. 15). Albertine’s western lifestyle also appears in her way of dressing. She is seen wearing a trademark blue costume while dancing at the powpows on the reservation. At her arrival on reservation, she is so “good-looking” that even her parents “hardly acknowledged her” (Erdrich, 1993: p. 12). In addition to that, she goes to the reservation with her own car, “a dull black hard-driven car with rusted wheel wells, a stick shift, and a windshield wiper only on the passenger side” (Erdrich, 1993: p. 11). Like a westernized girl, she is also involved with alcohol and drugs and rejects the previously defined role of women within her Native American culture (Beidler & Barton, 1999). However, beyond the observations of Beidler, Gay and Rosenthal, we can see her striving to maintain the delicate balance requirement for one who walks in two different cultures (Stokey, 1999). It is also this balance that Father Damien is seeking in reversing

the self/other dichotomy in *Last Report*.

In the reservation, Father Damien reflects a fierce willingness to learn the local language: The Ojibwan. He is so confident that the language constitutes an essential part for inter-racial relation, Father Damien first action once on the reservation is to learn “Ojibwe words and phrases” (Erdrich, 2001: p. 51). In his outstanding decision of learning the host language, Damien is assisted by Nanapush, an old man in the community. Damien declares that, “the old man was my teacher” (Erdrich, 2001: p. 210). During their talks about everything, Ojibwe language instruction is effortlessly exercised, because Father Damien always “took out a small bound notebook and recorded words and sentences” (Erdrich, 2001: p. 212). Damien is aware that if he succeeds in overcoming the impediment of the language, he will break up at the same time his otherness, his distinction from the local inhabitants. This interest in acquiring the host language clearly reflects his motivation to integrate into Indian culture, and by the same token he wants to demonstrate his intention to bridge the distance between Indians and white kept apart by centuries of colonial history and cultural dominance.

In addition to breaking down cultural barriers through the acquisition of the Native Americans language, Father Damien effectively shows a totally different purpose while doing his job as a priest. Indeed, while earlier priests focused on the church’s insistence upon the conversion of Native Americans in their mission and conceived indigenous people as subaltern individual, Damien is very open to the issues of Native people. He deeply cares for his parishioners and forms bonds with them, as he confesses it here, “I am becoming one with them” (Erdrich, 2001: p. 215). Actually, Damien has an inclusive rather than an exclusive view of Christianity. For when he sets foot on the reservation, he immediately begins to demonstrate his characteristic kindness by visiting Fleur and Nanapush, who have barely survived the terrible winter (Beidler & Barton, 1999). Nanapush recalls how Damien finds them out, “One day the new priest, just a boy really, opened our door. A dazzling and painful light flooded through and surrounded Fleur and me. Another Pillager was found, the priest said, Fleur’s cousin Moses was alive in the woods” (Erdrich, 2001: pp. 6-7).

Besides, later on in the novel, Damien helps the Pillager and Kashpaw families keep their lands. He uses his own money to prevent the loss of their forefathers’ land, “Father Damien came by and counted the money too, added the final quarter from his own pocket... There was enough, just exactly as Margaret had predicted, for the holding money on both Pillager and Kashpaw land. No less, no more” (Erdrich, 2001: p. 191).

His generosity has allowed Damien to better integrate the Indian community to the point that instead of calling them the Indians, Damien regards them as “His people” (Erdrich, 2001: p. 5), breaking the barrier between self and other. It is in this perspective that he openly confesses that, “He was proud to say he had been adopted into a certain family, The Nanapush family, whose long dead elder

had been his first friend on the reservation” (Erdrich, 2001: p. 5). In the reservation, Father Damien has become the priest who “puts the welfare of his flock (Indians) above all else” (Erdrich, 2001: p. 191); the priest who has saved Lulu from a black dog, the form of the devil. Again, thanks to His human sympathy and pragmatic approach, it is said in the narrative that, “Lulu became a self-sufficient woman. Father Damien helped her from the beginning, so she didn’t falter. She survived...” (Erdrich, 2001: p. 268).

By acting in the sense of counseling many Indian people, helping them support their difficulties, and speaking their language as one of them, Damien was welcome where no other white was allowed. Consequently, Indians appreciated his interest in their weaknesses as well as his sense of compassionate justice. As such, he earns respect and admiration of all the community members.

From all this, we can assert that, “Father Damien is a mature individual devoted to the welfare (not warfare) of fellow human being and that Damien was in the service of the spirit of goodness wherever that might evidence itself” (Howard, 2000: pp. 120-121).

In short, we notice on the basis of Bhabha’s vision of the “in-between” that the literary works of Erdrich bespeak how both Indians and non-Indians characters never fit conveniently into any niche; how they experience different hybrid process by seeking to balance contradictions.

As well, despite several centuries of experiences with authoritative discourse, Louise Erdrich’s portrayal of people or communities faced with foreign beliefs, customs and culture, has been a significant attempt to dismantle, challenge the racial discourse and categorization. She achieved this challenge thanks to protagonists that are not stereotypical Native Americans by investing them with self-reflective abilities (Beidler & Barton, 1999).

5. Conclusion

“Erdrich’s work opens closed doors, makes multiple experiences visible, includes instead of excluding. It recognizes and prioritizes specificity, instead of discriminatory universal qualities (...) the novels do not subscribe to the “either/or” but to the “both/and” logic” (Lysik, 2017: pp. 130-131).

These utterances of Marta Lysik sum up all the philosophy conveyed by the novels of Louise Erdrich. In fact, the latter differed from the earlier native writers who were much tougher in tone and which demanded for harsh actions against white people and their culture. The tone of her novels is a way of stressing that, “being an American and a Native American are not diametrically opposed identities” (Sanders, 1998: p. 153). Caroline Rosenthal also subscribes to the point of view of Karla Sanders, when she claims that, “Louise Erdrich as a mixed blood herself intends to demonstrate that cultural diversity or a position in-between two cultures is enriching, not depriving.” (Rosenthal, 2003: p. 108)

It is obvious that the novels of Louise Erdrich are more tolerant pleading for the mixture of cultures. Namely, they promote the heterogeneity of cultures and

identities which is a living reality of the twenty-first-century in America. They expound the situation of Native Americans in which the binaries of self/other, Christian/ Non-Christian, and male/ female are collapsed, by providing evidence that hybridity being far from being an handicap, is potentially enriching for people in general and particularly for Indians, who should examine themselves and have the ability to adjust to the new social, political, and economic environment of America.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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