

Eating or Being Eaten:

Symbolic Reversals in Louise Erdrich's Poetic Mythology

Abstract and Keywords: The central claim of this thesis is that the poetry of Louise Erdrich is built on a poetic mythology that reemploys the dynamic of the Trickster and the Wiindigoo on several different levels. I take some characters, plot developments, and even relations between words or phrases to be *manifestations* or *incarnations* of these mythical figures. As a whole, the symbolic structure that emerges, I claim, functions as what Roland Barthes calls an “*artificial myth*” (134)—a certain poetic form that pushes against the hegemony of the dominant myths—in this case the myth or logic of Manifest Destiny. In fact, the mythologies *themselves* become incarnations of the Trickster and the Wiindigoo. Like the Trickster, the American Indian mythologies are eaten by the consuming force of settler-colonialism—the Wiindigoo incarnate. The way that Erdrich writes against this force, moreover, mirrors the Trickster's liberation from the belly of the monster—providing personal and communal modes of agency for Erdrich and her characters.

Keywords: Artificial Myth, Original Fire, Manifest Destiny, the Edge of the Woods, Agency

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Introduction

Of all the writers commonly held to be part of the second wave of the Native American Literary Renaissance, Louise Erdrich is certainly the most prolific. The Renaissance was a period of increased literary output by Native American writers that started with the publication of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* in 1969 (Lincoln 8). Most writers who were part of that *first wave* had been writing and publishing for ten or sometimes twenty years before Erdrich became a writer herself in the early 1980s, yet they have often produced less than half the books. Leslie Marmon Silko, for instance, has only published three novels since 1977; N. Scott Momaday has published two novels since 1968; and James Welch published five novels in his lifetime. Louise Erdrich's first novel, *Love Medicine* (1984), was published fifteen years after the onset of the Native American Literary Renaissance and she has written fifteen more novels since then. It is true that Silko, Momaday, Welch, and most other Native American writers of that period did not limit their artistry only to writing novels and also published many poetry and non-fiction books, but none outdo Erdrich in sheer quantity, who—in addition to her novels—also wrote and published seven children's books, three poetry collections, and three non-fiction books—a prolificity reminiscent perhaps only of writers such as William Faulkner and Philip Roth.

Like Faulkner and Roth—whose influence on and alignments to Erdrich have been noted time and again (“A Letter from Philip Roth”; Stirrup 20), Erdrich writes stories with recurring characters, building and expanding, as Maria Russo noted in her review of *The Round House* (2012), “her own indelible Yoknapatawpha.” Indeed, like Roth, who chronicled the Jewish community of the “south-west corner of Newark, New Jersey” (Roth), and like Faulkner, who fictionalized the Lafayette Country of Mississippi in many of his novels, Erdrich has recreated her childhood home in her novels, building—what I will call—a *poetic mythology* that stretches across and throughout her oeuvre.

Erdrich was born on 7 June 1954 in Little Falls, Minnesota and spent most of her childhood in Wahpeton, North Dakota (Rainwater 271). The City of Wahpeton is situated on the state boundary of the largely forested Minnesota to the east and the Great Plains of North Dakota to the west (“Biomes of Minnesota”). This geographical division is reflected in the city's former name, “Chahinkapa” which is Lakota for “edge of the woods” (Leah). Reflecting on her youth, Louise Erdrich wrote “I grew up on the Great Plains. I'm a dry-land-for-hundreds-of-miles person” (*Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* 4). Indeed, the state highways branching out from the city to Fargo to the north and Wheaton to the south are straight asphalt lines cutting

through the endless grasslands of North Dakota. The fact that Erdrich hyphenates this spatiality into her personal identity is important and imperative for understanding her work as a novelist and poet.

This study, then, sets out from Louise Erdrich's childhood home of Wahpeton and her Chippewa mother's Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation—of which Louise is herself an enrolled member, tracing how Erdrich's regionally specific experiences can be seen as incentives for the symbolic structure that is enmeshed into her writing. I will look carefully at her three poetry collections, *Jacklight* (1984), *Baptism of Desire* (1989), and *Original Fire* (2003) and—from there—bring in comparisons, alignments, and insights from her novels to chart the poetic mythology that unites her writing under what could almost be called a “theory” or “ontological outlook” or ultimately, as I will argue in the final chapter, the beginnings of an ethical system.

Taking Wahpeton as a starting point, it is certainly no coincidence that the first line of Erdrich's famous poem “Jacklight” is “we have come to the *edge of the woods*” (my emphasis 3), signalling back to the original name of the place where she grew up.¹ The original cover art of her first poetry collection, *Jacklight* (1984), also shows a line of trees silhouetted by a bright light cast from the open plains in the distance. In structuralist terms, Erdrich implements her spatial situatedness into her writing to figure the dark woods as a sanctuary against the blinding light of open spaces. This dyad of light/darkness recurs throughout Erdrich's oeuvre—both in her novels and her poetry—and will be integral to my analysis of how her poetic mythology unites the symbolic and spatial. In this thesis, I will examine this intersection of symbol and space in Erdrich's oeuvre. In fact, the driving research question of this study is:

In what ways does Louise Erdrich reemploy aspects of traditional Ojibwe mythological dynamics to create a personal poetic mythology that is rooted in a sense of place and (thereby) refigures, navigates, and resists the settler-colonial symbolic structure—providing personal and communal modes of regaining agency?

This research question is made up of several components. Firstly, the initial focus is on the ways in which Erdrich creates a poetic mythology by uniting *symbol* and *place*. That is, I follow Fetterley and Pryse in their identification in *Writing out of Place*, that “regionalist literature”

¹ For reasons I will expound upon later, it is of little concern how—or even if—this alignment can be traced in psychological terms; that is, whether Erdrich *consciously* lifted the phrase “edge of the woods” from reality into her poems. The important thing is that both instances of the phrase are manifestations of the regional reality of Wahpeton: at the edge of the woods.

is distinguished from “local-colour writing” not only in that it critiques the state, but also “constructs an alternative model” (239-40). Aside from the fact that the region as a geographical phenomenon is a strong theme in Erdrich’s writing, Fetterley and Pryse’s definition of regionalist literature as anti-imperialist, provides a crucial framework from which to understand Erdrich’s poetic mythology. Indeed, the very act of writing about a region itself already suggests an intertwining of *symbol* and *place*, but in Erdrich’s case, the connection is even stronger because she imbues the land with mythological narratives—a mythological order that, as such, resists the state. The relation between the state and the region is particularly complicated in the case of American Indian Reservations because they are politically and historically located on the fault-lines of state and region. That is, they are both state and region.² This relationship automatically brings in issues of settler-colonialism (as referred to in the research question), transnationalism, and—the somewhat outdated—concept of cultural hybridity (the outdatedness of which I will discuss in the chapter below).

In a *New York Times* article about the importance of place in her writing, published a year after the publication of *Jacklight*, Erdrich stated that “a traditional storyteller fixes listeners in an unchanging landscape combined of myth and reality. People and place are inseparable” (“Where I Ought to Be: A Writer’s Sense of Place”). In this description, myth is the adhesive that unites people and the land. Myth is—in phenomenological terms—the ontological *mood* that colours and shapes reality, organizing it into a system of signification.³ This means that the phrase of “the edge of the woods” both figures as an anchor point that roots Erdrich’s writing into the North Dakota landscape and functions as a mytheme within her extended poetic mythology. The importance of this intersection of myth and place for this study is based on the assumption that I take from Fetterley and Pryse—and ultimately leads back to other feminist, post-colonial, and post-structuralist theories—that regions *are* the narratives that surround them. Regions, in this sense, can be constituted from *outside* or constitute themselves from *within*. As is the case with many colonial relations, “outside” here means the sovereign force of settler-colonialism, in this case the United States of America. “Within,” in this case, means Erdrich herself. Obviously, this inside/outside opposition needs to be nuanced, but it must be noted as a starting point to highlight what is at stake here.

² In fact, as of 1994, this unique relationship is visible in the US Department of Justice’s recognition of the sovereign status of Indian tribes as “domestic dependent nations”

³ Here, I define the word “mythology” very closely to the word “ontology.” I take this meaning largely from Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*, but I will justify this term in more detail in the theoretical chapter, below.

At bottom, I will argue that Louise Erdrich's writing instigates a disruption in the seemingly closed system—i.e. the mythology—of settler-colonialism, a historical meta-narrative in which the fall of the Native American people is inevitable (the narrative from *outside*). Erdrich's poetic mythology is a resistance that delimits the expansive self-same category of "Manifest Destiny," liberating indigenous agency by constructing an alternate worldview against the dominant one. *In one stroke*, Erdrich reveals and constructs; she lifts the veil of settler-colonial hypocrisy (the pretension of coherence), and immediately fills the gaps with her own mythemes, charging it with Ojibwe mythology—creating a personal or hybrid reality. It is on this opening—the threshold or gateway of the settler-colonial epoch—that Erdrich unifies people and place. That is, since this study begins from the premise that myth functions as the mediary between people (mind) and place (matter), I take closed systems not only to be discursive entities, but spatial entities as well—or both at the same time. This way, mythologies have physical boundaries that meet—in this case—at the edge of the woods.

This type of subversion of colonial discourse from the perspective of subaltern voices—the demand for a semantic *and* geographical presence—through the medium of writing is a common trope in Native American literature and post-colonialism in general and there are many commonalities that situate Erdrich's writing within those paradigms. The core claim of this study is that Louise Erdrich creates a symbolic structure—or poetic mythology—throughout her oeuvre that functions in similar terms as Homi Bhabha's "third space" or as Dean Rader called it in reference to Erdrich's writing: "sites of unification" (102). The example of the light/dark reversal that I described above illustrates Bhabha's view "that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized anew" (37). Concretely, the symbolic reversal of light/dark is the starting point of disruption. The symbolic reversal is a pinhole in the circumscription of the settler-colonial mythology, creating the opening—or gap, and thereby "revealing" what Derrida calls "the glow of the outside of the enclosure" (*Of Grammatology* 14).

The basis of Erdrich's poetic mythology, the starting point of her symbolic reversals, are—I argue—traceable to the Ojibwe story of Nanapush and the Wiindigoo, or the Trickster and the Man-Eater. Erdrich uses the core dynamic of this story to counter the hegemony of settler-colonial intrusion. There are many different versions of the Wiindigoo myth, but one continuity throughout the different stories is that the Wiindigoo eats the Nanapush and the Nanapush, through some trickery, manages to escape—often killing the Wiindigoo in the process. I will claim that Erdrich appropriates the dynamic of this story by figuring the settler-colonial logic, or the mythology of Manifest Destiny, as an all-consuming force that aims to devour (i.e. kill

or acculturate) the indigenous people. Like Nanapush who rips through the stomach of the Wiindigoo, Louise Erdrich rips through the enclosure of the dominant discourse. This counter-mythological dynamic can be brought back to the dyad of this study's title: *eating or being eaten*. But it would be risky to reduce Erdrich's poetic mythology solely to this colonial dynamic. Naturally, Erdrich's writing is endlessly more complex and diverse than this study can ever aim to describe—or encapsulate, for that matter. I therefore claim that Erdrich's symbolic structure must be read *horizontally*, where symbols are ordered as manifestations of the same dynamic and where symbolic density is attained in terms of form rather than content, as opposed to reading her work *vertically*, where symbols are stacked onto each other and where the “deepest” meaning can be said to be the “true” meaning. In other words, Erdrich's poetic mythology is a network of metaphoric clusters that evoke each meaning rather than refer to just one underlying meaning.

Theoretical Background

Over the past year or so, I have gone through several phases of trying to fit the perfect theoretical scheme onto this phenomenon in Erdrich's writing. Thus far in this introduction, I have used concepts and ideas from feminist, post-colonialist, and poststructuralist theories, but as is often the case with Native American writing, western models seldom fit well.⁴ This is one of the reasons I have decided to pick certain elements from different theoretical frameworks to create an applicable lens through which to analyse Louise Erdrich's poetic mythology—taking cues both from western theories and non-western theories. Most importantly, I needed theories about myths and place. Countless commentators have pointed to the importance of place with regard to Native American literature. Kathryn Shanley, for instance, wrote that “nothing defines indigenous peoples more than belonging to a place, a homeland” (qtd. in Hafen 154). Similarly, James MacKay begins his article on Native American poetry with the claim that “place is, indisputably, a central preoccupation of Native American writing, for both writers and critics” (249). Furthermore, in their overview of Native American Studies, Kidwell and Velie state that “land is the basic source of American Indian identity” (21).

Most of these studies have looked at the “Ojibwe roots” in some of Erdrich's novels—with quite a lopsided foregrounding of her earlier novels—especially *Tracks* (1988) and *Love*

⁴ In fact, the very given that western models do not fit well will become part of the analysis. That is, Erdrich's counter-hegemonic mythology precisely disrupts the closed systems of western models, such as strict theoretical frameworks. I will expound upon this in the following chapter.

Medicine (1984). This is why, in her chapter on Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* (2012), Birgit Däwes wrote that "whereas critical studies of [Erdrich's] 1980s novels abound, the relative lack of academic engagements with the more recent texts calls for a shift of attention" (429). Rather than "a shift of attention," however, I propose a *broadening of attention*. Few scholars have taken the phenomenological perspective of taking Erdrich's entire oeuvre—including her poetry—into account in one study, even though her work is famous for comprising "an entire narrative universe" (Däwes 428). In fact, the expansive, rather than progressive nature of her writing demands a more comprehensive perspective. The continuities throughout her work signals what Derrida called "the end of the book" (*Of Grammatology* 28), but which in Native American literature is quintessentially informed by tenets of the oral tradition—and which will become part of the analysis itself.

Secondly, the idea of the "Ojibwe roots" is often figured as a cultural archive to which Erdrich's writing relates in terms of distance. In taking this comprehensive and phenomenological view, this study foregrounds how Louise Erdrich *creates* Ojibwe culture rather than *being created* by it.⁵ This latter approach is what David Treuer refers to as "the essentialist project" which—contrary to intentions—actually *silences* individual authors by trying to open up the silence of the entire culture—fixating it as a touchstone to which the writers relate, but are not active participants of. Though there are arguments that favour the communal over the strictly individual, it risks effacing difference through extrapolation. This is essentially an issue of authenticity, a problematic concept in Native American studies, because it fixes culture in a static past, rather than a vibrant and dynamic presence. Recounting an Ojibwe myth in her non-fiction book *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (2003), Erdrich begins by stating: "This is what I have been told" (12). This opening sentence illustrates how Erdrich's implementation of Ojibwe myths and imagery is highly personal—linking back to her "sites of unification" described above. It reveals how her understanding of her culture does not come from one version recounted in a book but has been orally transmitted. Approaching Erdrich's work neither as a representation of culture nor as relating to culture, but as an active centre that *generates* culture and meaning is innovative and important in this regard because it preserves what Treuer calls "the integrity of the text" without falling into the formalist trap of neglecting context altogether (4).

⁵ Interestingly, in the course of this study, it will become apparent that the dyad of *creating* and *being created* is connected to the image of *eating* and *being eaten*—incorporating the theoretical critique into the work of Erdrich's poetic mythology itself.

Thesis Structure: Encounter, Consumption, and Liberation

In the first chapter below, I will sketch this theoretical and methodological assemblage and explicate precisely which elements from the different theories and methods I will be using. I will describe in more depth how some theoretical concepts are more appropriate than others. The chapter is divided into two main sections. In the first section, I will explain what could be called the meta-viewpoint of this study or the overarching theoretical framework. That is, I will juxtapose certain opposing views with regard to Native American literature—ranging from scholars who claim we should only analyse Native American literature from Native American theoretical viewpoints (Warrior; Gunn Allen) to scholars who say that there is no such thing as Native American literature to begin with (Treuer)—and position myself within that academic field. I will come back to the issues of “authenticity” and the “integrity of the text” before moving to the more hands on description of this study’s method.

The second section will, then, be devoted to how I will methodologically approach the poetry and fiction itself. In short, the locus of my analysis is taken from Roland Barthes’ structuralist work in *Mythologies*, but without mirroring its mode of ideological critique. Rather, I will home in on modes of resisting dominant ideologies from *within* the literary work, rather than critiquing it from the outside. Talking about the difficulty of vanquishing dominant mythologies from the inside, Barthes writes that “the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth*” (134). With “*artificial myths*,” Barthes is thinking primarily of satirical works, such as William Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* (1959) or Margaret Atwood’s *A Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) where an artificial mythology is used to lay bare the hypocrisies of real-world mythologies, such as Manifest Destiny, or other imperialist narratives. In the case of Louise Erdrich, the situation is more complex because she writes in a realist or magical realist style and does not create an artificial myth but employs an *alternative* myth—the myth of Nanapush and the Wiindigoo—to disrupt and reinterpret the hegemony of settler-colonialism and its largely Judeo-Christian discourse.⁶

In the second through fourth chapter, I will analyse Louise Erdrich’s three poetry collections, *Jacklight* (1984), *Baptism of Desire* (1989), and *Original Fire* (2003), respectively. These chapters will follow the thematic progression of *encounter*, *consumption*, and *liberation*—the three steps of the dynamic between the Trickster and Wiindigoo that I will

⁶ By artificial, in this case, Barthes means that the author has constructed a myth purely for the sake of demystifying the hypocrisies of the dominant discourse, as satires do. Needless to say, it is problematic to call Erdrich’s poetic mythology “artificial” as it is no more or less artificial than the mythology of “manifest destiny.”

argue is characteristic of Erdrich's poetic mythology. The reason why Erdrich's *poetry* is the centre-point of this study is that, as Dean Rader has argued, Erdrich's dialogical syncretism or "bimodality" "finds its most acute articulation in Erdrich's poetry" (102). "Through poetry," Rader writes, "Erdrich combines modes of cultural dwelling, enabling her to reside in two worlds at once, a gesture that serves as a metaphor for many Native Americans and Native American communities who feel torn between Anglo and Native cultures" (102).

I take special care in including Erdrich's second poetry collection, *Baptism of Desire*, in a third but shorter chapter, because this book of poems is often set aside as it primarily deals with Christian, rather than Ojibwe imagery. This is important because it reveals that a Native American text does not have to be about spirit animals, moccasins, and canoes to be Native American.⁷ Even though *Baptism of Desire* is ostensibly primarily about Christian issues, the book actually sets forth and expands Erdrich's poetic mythology and the accompanying symbolic reversals—and, in effect, the resistance *against* the dominant discourse with which it supposedly complies. As I wrote above, the dyad of light and dark recurs as a mytheme in Erdrich's poetic mythology—and will, in fact, be the starting point and locus of this chapter's exploration. The symbolic reversal takes place in the deconstruction or de-sedimentation of the hierarchy embedded in the light/dark opposition. In Christian symbolism, light is good, and darkness is bad. Erdrich reverses this hierarchy by embracing the soothing darkness against the clinical brightness. In a way, "deconstruction" is a more applicable word, as "reversal" tends to connote something like the Nietzschean master-slave morality, but it will turn out that Erdrich's symbolic reversals are more rigorously subversive, disruptive and complex than the reversals of slave moralities imply.

Throughout the chapters, I will substantiate the analyses of the poems by exploring how Erdrich's poetic mythology reverberates from her poems throughout her oeuvre by paying specific attention to the novels *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), and the first two novels in the Justice Trilogy—*The Plague of Doves* (2008) and *The Round House* (2012). I have decided to consider these novels because they represent both ends of Erdrich's oeuvre. I aim to show how Erdrich deepens and expands—rather than progresses—her fictional reality.⁸ This chapter will also explore what implications Louise Erdrich's poetic mythology has for her

⁷ It is important to note that by "Native American" I do not mean that Erdrich's symbolic order is representative of Native American cultures, or that extrapolation is possible from Erdrich's poetic mythology to traditional Ojibwe epistemologies—although, why not? I will explain this more thoroughly in the next chapter.

⁸ I will return to the relevance of "deepening" and "expanding" versus "progressing" in that chapter, too.

personal poetics. The symbolic reversals extend way beyond the limits of a simple listing of a symbolic order. Concepts such as “literature,” “writing,” “books,” are taken from their dominant mythology and recast in an “Erdrichian” light. This gesture from Erdrich’s poetic mythology to her personal poetics as a (re)interpretation of everything parallels or continues the project of my previous study on contemporary Native American poetry—*Interpretations of Everything: The Personal Poetics of Natalie Diaz, Layli Long Soldier, and Tommy Pico*, which is currently under review at SUNY Press.

In the conclusion, I will comment on the possibilities of operationalizing the analysis of Erdrich’s poetic mythology for further understanding of the rest of her oeuvre, but also suggest how its conclusions and outlook can reverberate to other Ojibwe writers—such as Gerald Vizenor or Tomson Highway—or even to Native American writers from other tribal nations, but also, eventually to American literature at large. This study will thereby contribute to the larger project of understanding literature beyond postmodernism, taking part in a paradigm shift from a suspicious engagement to a faithful engagement to literature.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Assemblage

Before I can truly begin this chapter, I have to make a preliminary note on style.⁹ In *The Voice in the Margin* (1989)—an extensive theoretical study on the issue of canonicity in relation to Native American literature, Arnold Krupat argues in favour of a dialogical approach to Native American literature (if not literature in general). He uses Bakhtin's concepts of "heteroglossia" and "polyvocality" to argue against the figure of the humanist ego that has pervaded the history of American literary criticism—and the history of Western philosophy in general (76-77). This ego is not only taken to be a preconception of the West in terms of presumed literary archetypes *in the text*, but it is also the figure of the author who puts the "author" in "*authority*"—whose death Roland Barthes famously declared in 1967 ("The Death of the Author"). The problem with the humanist ego—or the cartesian *cogito*; the modern subject, as it is also called—is not necessarily that it is wrong or philosophically unsound, but that it is historically contingent.¹⁰ Some of the clearest literary examples of the humanist ego that come to mind are the protagonists in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Marlow. These are isolated subjects who are the existential foundation and centre-point of their own existence—figures that have typified western modernity from Descartes onwards.¹¹

Krupat writes that the idea of the "monological" author is outdated and, more importantly, that research written "in the languages of the West, in books by single authors, who have written alone in their offices or studies" has done considerable harm to non-western narratives and identities (137). It has done so in two ways: firstly, historiographers and anthropologists writing about Native American literature, cultures and history, written by non-indigenous authors, have—in the past—been concerned with "saving" the American "fantasy" (in the

⁹ Annoying as it may be, post-structuralists tend to do several things at once and even though I am writing about style, I am also already illustrating my theoretical approach and starting my analysis of Erdrich. That is, the discourse that Erdrich resists is—in part—also embedded in the academic setting from which I write.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault argued the same in his essay "What is an Author?"

¹¹ And in true cartesian fashion: the fact that they are the locus of their own existence, means that they are automatically the locus of existence as a whole, which functions as the horizon or backdrop of their consciousness—as Braeckman, Raymaekers, and van Riel illustrate in their history of western philosophy (118).

words of Walter L. Hixson).¹² Hixson, in *American Settler Colonialism*, writes that in this sort of writing “a national mythology displaces the indigenous past” (11). These studies form, as it were, a continuous monologue that “closes off [indigenous] narratives and discourses while privileging one’s own” (Hixson 10). A shift to dialogism would allow history to be told from different perspectives and Native peoples to speak for themselves—as has indeed been the project in most of the humanities and postmodern literature for the past thirty to forty years or so.

The second issue with monologism and the humanist ego, according to Krupat, is that it has shaped the criteria of literary excellence and thereby created a literary canon that excludes many non-western writers from its conception of “what good literature makes.”¹³ Krupat points out that interpretations of selfhood and identity-formation in Native American literature and more specifically Native American autobiographies reveal a degree of dialogism—and thereby the absence of the humanist ego—that is not present in most Western literature. If the evaluation of literary excellence is tailored to texts that have monological narrators such as *Crusoe* or *Marlow*, it makes sense that dialogical texts by indigenous writers are automatically filtered out.¹⁴ In practice, dialogism in indigenous texts means that different and divergent voices are given equal stage in the text and that thereby something is created that Frederic Jameson calls the “collective subject” (qtd. in Krupat 132).

Admittedly, both these problems are somewhat situated in the past—at least from an humanities perspective; postmodernism has successfully helped to create a more inclusive understanding of canonicity and most English Departments teach a diverse canon. Both these problems of the humanist subject are also represented in the legacies of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Heart of Darkness*. The problem of monological arrogance in *Robinson Crusoe* is what inspired J.M. Coetzee to write *Foe* (1986) and Derek Walcott to write, and stage, *Pantomime* (1978)—both postcolonial pastiches that retell the story of Robinson Crusoe from different perspectives,

¹² Hixson seems to use “fantasy” synonymously to “mythology” and is specifically referring to the driving narrative behind American settler-colonialism: Manifest Destiny. It could also be referred to as a “logic” or “epoch,” but I will consistently use the word “mythology” to refer to Manifest Destiny.

¹³ This issue has been addressed by many theoreticians, most notably among whom Richard Ohman in *The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction 1960-1975*; and Thiongo, Liyong, and Owuor-Anyumba in “On the Abolition of the English Department.”

¹⁴ Not to speak of the institutional limitations of publishers not wanting to publish work by indigenous writers and gatekeepers of canonicity not wanting to take work by indigenous writers seriously, regardless of its content, as described by Zora Neale Hurston in her essay “What White Publishers Won’t Print.”

opening up the monologism in favour of polyvocality. Similarly, Chinua Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* (1958) as a response to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—giving voice to the silent black figures of Africa who function merely as scenery or symbols for Marlow's psychological development.

It is clear how “dialogism” functions on two levels in this study: both from my perspective as a scholar and Erdrich's perspective as a writer. That is, when Erdrich imbues mythological narratives into a place—and thereby constructs the region—she is writing against the monologism of the outside. Fetterley and Pryse, when they discuss the appropriate approach to regionalist literature, also make the distinction between “looking at” and “looking with” which corresponds to monologism and dialogism, respectively. “Looking at” the region from outside frames “the perspective of the one who looks as universal and transcendent” (36). Concretely, we will see that Erdrich resists this tendency in two ways. On the one hand, there are many instances where the universality of a male character from outside the region is interrogated and dismantled by a female character from within the region or by the speaker of the poem. On the other hand, the symbolic structure that underlies Erdrich's poetic mythology directly counters the symbolic structure of the outside. The major example here is the reversal of “light as good” and “dark as bad” that Erdrich employs in her poems. This “turning around” of the values connected to symbolic oppositions creates a space of sovereignty that is the “alternative model” that Fetterley and Pryse claim is typical of regionalist literature.

Since the dimension of Erdrich's writing that I wish to highlight is that she writes against the limits of a monological system, it would be inconsistent to approach her writing from only one theoretical model. This is why I have opted for a theoretical assemblage—as discussed in the introduction—rather than one clear-cut theoretical framework. This perspective allows Louise Erdrich's work to take primacy over the theories applied to it and the culture which it is supposed to represent. As I shortly suggested in the introduction, Erdrich's counter-hegemonic poetic mythology also resists encapsulation of analytical models. If I were to take on a certain postmodern metalanguage (e.g. psychoanalysis or Marxist cultural theory), I would consequently turn into the Wiindigoo who tries to legislate (or consume) Erdrich's writing by circumscribing it into a closed theoretical conceptualization.

In the section below I will develop some of the ideas I have just described and explain in more detail how—after the demise of the modern subject or humanist ego—there are also some issues with postmodernism, or “the hermeneutics of suspicion” that need to be resolved before moving on to the main analysis of this study. In addition to the problem with the hermeneutics of suspicion, I will expound upon a similar problem of cultural readings as criticized by David

Treuer in Native American literary studies, which are related but not necessarily the same. Both modes of reading tend—or at least risk—to foreground context and neglect literature *as* literature. I will explain how David Treuer’s shift in direction from origination to destination might keep both context and text within the scope of the literary scholar.

A Shift in Direction

It is true that the concept of the humanist ego has been largely decentralized in contemporary postmodern theory. The decentralization of subjectivity, the fragmentation of the self, and the deconstruction of the modern *cogito* has spread throughout the humanities in the form of, what Paul Ricoeur dubbed, “the hermeneutics of suspicion” (32). This mode of reading has three spiritual leaders, the three masters of suspicion: Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud. They are enemies of the modern subject because they place the origin of its actions outside of itself. No longer is Robinson Crusoe the centre of the universe, because his actions, dispositions and dimensions can be traced back to a will to power (Nietzsche), his socioeconomic circumstances (Marx), or neurotic drives (Freud). In other words, the humanist ego is not a self-same entity, but an assemblage under the command of what Kant called “external legislator[s]” (33).

Regardless of the inherent plurality of postmodern theories, “suspicion” is what circumscribes them within a single paradigm—whether it be structuralism, post-structuralism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, gender studies, etc. The word “suspicion” refers to assumption that the sensible world is a construction of manifestations of latent forces. With regard to literature, this means that the words in a text have two meanings: the superficial meaning and its ulterior meaning. The ulterior meaning is whatever the external legislators have determined. A simple example is the writing of Ernest Hemingway. Viewed from the perspective of the humanist ego, Ernest Hemingway writes about masculine heroes just like himself. From a suspicious point of view, Hemingway is daydreaming, writing his own latent insecurities into his texts. In the former reading, Hemingway is his own origin; he is free, he *creates*. In the second reading, Hemingway’s decisions are governed by psychological limitations; he is not free, he *is created*.¹⁵ In postmodern literature, this problem is dealt with, or bypassed, by rejecting the humanist ego beforehand. In his memoir, *Summertime* (2009), J.M. Coetzee constructs his own history by letting other people tell his story (dialogism). In

¹⁵ This example does have some bearing with regard to Hemingway, but I chose this example just for purposes of clarity; this is not a thorough or conclusory reading of Hemingway’s writing.

short, the point is that “Coetzee” is the total sum of conceptions people have of him—there is no single, autonomous ego at the heart of it. In other words, *the novel is suspicious of itself*.

Another term for suspicious readings is “symptomatic reading,” because it takes appearances (the words on a page) to be symptoms of a latent structure. This is the basic structure of Saussurean linguistics where the appearances—or *parole*—are analysed to construct the underlying structure—or *langue*. The problem with the hermeneutics of suspicion—I claim—is that the structure becomes more important than the symptom. The “structure” can also be called simply: the context (with or around the text). From a historicist perspective, suspicious readings make total sense because, indeed, a text is constructed by the context. The main goal of the hermeneutics of suspicion is to “expose,” “demystify,” “decipher,” or “lay bare” the hidden hypocrisies of society. In reference to the three masters of suspicion, Paul Ricoeur wrote that these different theories “represent three convergent procedures of demystification” (34).

The risk of the hermeneutics of suspicion—as Rita Felski points out in her article “Context Stinks”—is that context becomes an all-determining contextual frame. She writes: “context, as the ampler, more expansive reference point, will invariably trump the claims of the individual text, knowing it far better than it can ever know itself” (574). In other words, texts become nothing but “cultural symptoms of their own time” (Felski 575). In recent years this has led many literary scholars to argue for a new kind of formalism or “surface reading” that disregards context altogether. My issue with the hermeneutics of suspicion is not that it looks at context, but that it makes context the ultimate goal of literary analysis. As Freud pointed out, too, the psychoanalytical approach to literature “is less a purely literary topic than a psychological one” (419). Before stating my position on this matter more precisely, I will explicate another variant of the hermeneutics of suspicion that takes place especially in Native American literary studies.

The hermeneutics of suspicion is mostly an ideological critique. The thing to be “demystified” are the ideologies that are embedded in literary texts or other cultural objects. In gender studies, ideological assumption about masculinity and femininity are demystified; in postcolonial studies, assumptions about imperial superiority are demystified. The attention is primarily on the West—as it has been the dominant cultural force in most of human history. My analysis of the humanist ego in the previous section, for example, is also a suspicious reading in that regard. The idea is that the dominant discourse automatically normalizes a symbolic structure that fixes people, bodies, identities, and places into an oppositional deadlock.

The relevance of this explication about the hermeneutics of suspicion is that it makes little sense to use it as a theoretical perspective on non-western texts. Like the example of Coetzee, Erdrich's writing must firstly be understood as being deconstructive itself. Nevertheless, all-determining contextual frames have found their way into Native American literary studies as well—or have even become an inherent part of it. Paula Gunn Allen famously wrote in her book, *The Sacred Hoop* (1986), that in order to understand contemporary Native American literature, critics must understand “the culture from which it springs” (54). That is to say, critics must attune themselves to the “basic assumptions” that inform Native American authors. These assumptions go all the way down to the level of a culture's ontological and anthropological framework, the way one sees the world.¹⁶ One obvious assumption, at this point, is that of the humanist ego in Western cultures. One of the most often claimed things in Native American studies is that this humanist ego does not exist in Native American ontologies and epistemologies to begin with. Gay Barton, for instance, describes “the native perspective that individual character does not exist in isolation but is part of familial and communal systems” (77).

Even though the engagement with literary texts from this cultural or ontological perspective cannot be called “suspicious,” it still risks focusing too much on a culture's “basic assumptions” and thereby treats the literary texts as mere manifestations of this culture. The point is that it encourages a mode of reading where, in order to understand a book, you should not read that book (the text) but read another book (the context). In fact, this is precisely the criticism that David Treuer brought against the cultural readings in his book, *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* (2006). He writes that “to treat [Native American literature] as culture is to destroy it as literature” (68). Both the hermeneutics of suspicion and the cultural readings in the vein of Gunn Allen focus primarily on what *made* the text—i.e. what is the *origin* of the text? This is inherently implied in the word “symptomatic” because one analyses the symptoms to decipher its origin. Treuer, on the other hand, writes that he is interested in “how novels act” (5). To him, overcontextualisation is an affront to the “integrity of the text” (4). Most critics of Native American literature, Treuer claims, tend to reduce texts to their context, leading to the conclusion that all texts written by Native American authors cannot be about anything else than native issues and that every word can be traced back to some native viewpoint. The texts, in effect, become nothing more than “cultural treasures” or “some kind of artifacts” (31). So even though motivated by appreciation rather than suspicion, the effect is

¹⁶ By “anthropological,” in this case, I mean the culturally dependent interpretations of what a human is.

the same: texts are read as *symptoms* and their (author's) agency is locked in an all-determining contextual frame.

To bypass this problem, Treuer argues for a shift in focus from *origination* to *destination*. Like Freud, Treuer realizes that the obsession with origination is much more a psychological or sociological issue rather than a literary one. Something that Treuer does not point out, but that is important to me, is that the hermeneutics of suspicion and its ideological critique is a very viable mode of analysis. It is, however, not able to answer this study's research question. This study is interested in the ways that Erdrich interrogates cultures, mythologies and generates meaning in her poetry and novels. Unlike Felski's claim, context does not "stink" after the shift in direction. To treat literature *as* literature is not a suggestion of a Wildean "art for art's sake" approach to literature, but a mode of reading that foregrounds literature as the main object of analysis by attributing a certain degree of autonomy to it.

The shift from *origination* to *destination* has many consequences with regard to what I mean by a "text." To look at destination is to look at what the text *does*, i.e. what the text makes rather than what made the text.¹⁷ This shift is therefore also a shift from *passivity* to *activity*. A text that *is created* by its context is automatically passive, whereas a text that *creates* context is active. The decentralization of the humanist ego, it seems, has thrown out the baby with the bathwater. Just because subjectivity can no longer be explained in terms of an isolated, totally self-governing entity, does not mean that there is no agency at all. This is why I think the work of Roland Barthes is applicable to this study's purpose. Even though Roland Barthes is known for his ideological critiques in popular culture and is therefore often situated within the paradigm of suspicion, Barthes—as he did in *S/Z* (1970) and later in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973)—tends to leave small hints or traces of possible agency within the closed systems of the structuralist universe—foreshadowing his post-structuralist turn. In *S/Z*, Barthes says that a literary text can be seen as the symptom of the connotative structure of its language or, in activated form, as the "text-as-subject" that *associates* with the structure of its language (8). After the shift in direction from origination to destination, the text is no longer taken to be a symptom and is much closer to Barthes' idea of the "text-as-subject." Unlike other phenomenological approaches to literature, Roland Barthes allows me to retain context in

¹⁷ This is also why I think the word "destination" is not precise enough, as it evokes the idea of a static aim at the end of the literary work, while the point should be that the literary work *itself*, the process of the work—writing it and reading it—should be the main attention point. This is also what French phenomenologist Jean-Paul Sartre argues in *What is Literature?*—a work that underwrites this study's phenomenological perspective.

addition to the text itself by means of the concept of “association.” This way, I can move from the “hermeneutics of suspicion” to the “hermeneutics of faith” without being blindsided by latent ideological forces.

In the theoretical explication above, I have in part argued in favour of a “purist” perspective on literature. In a way, I have rejected the importance that is put on interdisciplinarity by the humanities departments, because it risks losing a hold of the text’s integrity. At the same time, however, I have redrawn some of the lines that connect literary studies to other disciplines. Taking on a phenomenological perspective on literature automatically leads to the unification of literary studies and metaphysics. Texts become sites that can generate meaning and that reveal a certain kind of ontology. Indeed, when Erdrich writes against the dominant discourse, she is writing against a mode of being and inscribes her own mode(s) of being within its seams, liberating dialogical agency from a monological frame. In the next section I will explore the leeway of agency in Barthes’ earlier text *Mythologies* and establish a concrete methodological model for the analysis of Erdrich’s poetic mythology in the following chapters.

Methodological Assemblage: Mythologies

In order to analyse Louise Erdrich’s poetic mythology, I will set out from Roland Barthes’ structuralist framework in *Mythologies* (1957). The reason why this book works so well is because Barthes—as he did in *S/Z* (1970) and later in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973)—tends to leave small hints or traces of possible agency within the closed systems of the structuralist universe—foreshadowing his post-structuralist turn. One of the main objections against structuralism—especially in reference to Native American studies—is that it treats cultures and literatures as closed systems. Carol Edelman Warrior reflects in her essay, “Indigenous Collectives: A Meditation on Fixity and Flexibility,” that formalist and structuralist techniques were drilled into her when she was an undergraduate student, and only later did she realize that such methodological approaches are “a way to cage meaning and effect epistemic violence to both Indigenous thought and Indigenous lives” (378). Edelman Warrior talks about formalism and structuralism as though these are interchangeable concepts, though they oppose each other in many ways. Nevertheless, the fixation of a literary work into a closed system circumscribes these two approaches within the same paradigm. A short twofold explication of its shortcomings justifies the current methodology; reveals the issue of closed systems; and illustrates the leeway of agency possible in a Barthesian framework.

Formalism

Firstly, the problem with formalist approaches such as New Criticism, in the vein of T.S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, and I.A. Richards, is that they tend to base their evaluative judgments on what Friedrich Nietzsche refers to in the first chapter of *Beyond Good & Evil* as the “prejudices of philosophers” (1).¹⁸ Nietzsche’s critique attacks the historical emphasis on consciousness—and its primary figure: *the humanist ego*. The problem is that this figure is strictly delineated, demarcated, or circumscribed—i.e. *fixed*. Above, in the theoretical assemblage, I discussed the concept of the humanist ego at length, but this assumption about humanity reverberates throughout the formalist tools that the New Critics employ. Like the humanist ego, “the book,” in New Criticism, is taken to be (and, implicitly, *should* therefore be) a definitive, self-contained, and self-referential aesthetic object.

This interpretative model does not apply to many Native American texts. N. Scott Momaday, for instance, tells the story of how the Pueblo people crossed the country and reached Rainy Mountain in his novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968). A year later, N. Scott Momaday told the story again in his book *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969). He retold the story a third time in his essay collection *The Man Made of Words* (1997). Not one version can be said to be the definitive one; no version can be said to be the best one; and no version can be understood without the network of the other versions in sight. This is also what I referred to in the introduction when I justified the comprehensive perspective on Louise Erdrich’s oeuvre: isolating the books limits the totality of its interpretations. Louise Erdrich, too, often returns to the same characters in different books, retelling the same events in a slightly different way or from a different perspective. In fact, Erdrich has extensively revised and extended her first novel *Love Medicine* in 1993 and her novel *The Antelope Wife* (1998). The very idea of revising a canonical novel in a later edition completely throws out the idea of a novel as something definitive and self-contained. This is what I meant by the *expansive* rather than *progressive* nature of Native American writing. Books do not follow each other up chronologically but expand in all directions—deepening and layering the oeuvre as a whole. Deborah L. Madsen observed the same pattern in the literary oeuvre of Gerald Vizenor, writing: “the trajectory of Vizenor’s poetic career resists a linear teleology in favour of a tribal circling, a return to common tropes, themes, and structures” (ix). Madsen calls this pattern “the Tribal Trajectory” (which I will be using in reference to Louise Erdrich in the next chapter as well) and it is clear

¹⁸ Of course, Nietzsche was well-known to the modernists, too, but his philosophy as a master of suspicion manifested itself most clearly in postmodernism, especially Michel Foucault.

that the formalist tools of close-analysis do not do justice—or are simply unable to *see*—this pattern—and thereby inhibits the full range of possible interpretations of indigenous literary texts.

This is what Carol Edelman Warrior seems to mean by “epistemic violence.” The basic assumptions of the epistemologies of Western literary criticism conceal Native American writing, locking it down, rather than opening it up. In phenomenological terms, Western (formalist) assumptions about literature make the interpreter colour blind for the full prism of Native American literature. This, too, is what made Paula Gunn Allen say that “the significance of a literature can be best understood in terms of the culture from which it springs” (54). Ostensibly, this would encourage the delineation of something of an “indigenous formalism” were it not that the very outset of codifying and classifying literature on the basis of rigid categorical forms does not correspond to the rhizomatic nature of indigenous literatures. It may seem strange to the reader that I am now turning to a cultural approach to literature. In the previous section, I signalled this study’s shift in direction and it has to be noted that I read Paula Gunn Allen’s claim from the perspective of David Treuer. In the end, Treuer is right in criticizing the fact that Paula Gunn Allen’s *Sacred Hoop* is much more about “the culture from which it springs” than it is about “the significance of a literature.” At the same time, after Treuer rejects the indigenous separatist literary approach, his close-analysis, too, mostly falls straight back into traditional formalist interpretation. This is the problem of rejecting theory in general: if one does not take on a critical theory explicitly, one does so implicitly, and even though Treuer’s theoretical explication in the first chapter is insightful, the consequent analyses are burdened by the pitfalls of formalism discussed above.

Structuralism

In addition to formalism, Edelman Warrior criticizes structuralism as being colour blind to Native American writing. It may seem strange, then, to take on Roland Barthes’ structuralist methodology. The problem with structuralism is rooted in the history of structuralist anthropology within Native American cultures, especially the work by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the 1950s. Mythologies, in the structuralist sense are closed systems, cutting reality into oppositions that function in the same way as languages, that is, they have a grammar. Like formalism, the problematic presumption is stasis and fixity. As the term implies, structuralism rigidifies and—as Paula Gunn Allen writes—they “suppose a rational ordering of the world” (104). Roland Barthes, once he had made the turn to post-structuralism in the late 1960s, noted in the new preface of *Mythologies* that his analyses “belong to the past” (8), precisely because

of these limitations of closed systems. The main difference between structuralism and post-structuralism is that the latter focusses on the “slippage” between *signifiers* and *signifieds*. The point is no longer that reality is structured in oppositional dyads, but that it *appears* to do so and that it is beneficial for a select few to maintain that appearance. Oddly, then, structuralism aims to show how reality is ordered in oppositions, whereas post-structuralism aims to show that it is not.

The reason that Roland Barthes’ structuralist work in *Mythologies* is still relevant for this study, is that I am reading Barthes’ structuralist work from a post-structuralist perspective. Throughout the book, Barthes is developing a methodology of conducting an ideological analysis of mythologies. By mythologies, Barthes means a closed system of depoliticized meaning. He gives examples of the cultures of wrestling, photography, cars, food, and many other realms of popular culture. The clearest example I know is not from *Mythologies*, but from *The Fashion System* (1967), in which Barthes argues that fashion has a grammar, too. Fashion items, Barthes argues, are like morphemes that, together, form words and sentences. That is, the mythology of fashion instructs what types of clothing go together and what the items *signify* in isolation or in a certain composition. The structuralist critique of Barthes as a mythologist is that there are no ontological grounds that state that a lime-green raincoat does not go with turquoise hot pants. Barthes says that such a system is “depoliticized” because the ideology that is embedded in the fashion system has been naturalized (and has thereby become invisible). He writes that “myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal” (*Mythologies* 142). This, too, was the point that Fetterley and Pryse made when they wrote that dominant perspectives on the region form outside frame themselves as “universal and transcendent” (36). Again, it becomes clear how this study’s theoretical and methodological approach is locked into the analysis of Erdrich that will follow in the following chapters.

In her preface to Barthes’ *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), Susan Sontag explains the structuralist conception of myth, propagated by Levi-Strauss and Barthes, stating that “all explanatory models for fundamental states of affairs, whether sophisticated or primitive, are myths” (xxiv). In this same text, Roland Barthes foreshadows his own study of myths by stating that any linguistic model is “the comforting area of an ordered space” (9). A myth is therefore a circumference or horizon within which a certain set of signs is distributed in an orderly way. Manifest Destiny is this: an explanation of reality and in extension a *justification* of that reality. It states: “this is reality and this reality is *good*.” Myth embeds morality into description, leaping over the gap from *fact* to *value*, echoing Hume’s well-known is–ought fallacy.

In the previous section, I have argued why this study is not an ideological analysis and it is not my intention to show how Louise Erdrich's writing is a depoliticized system of signification. Rather, the point is to show how Louise Erdrich's writing *is itself* an ideological analysis of a specific mythology: Manifest Destiny. Historically, the mythology of Manifest Destiny has primarily been a justification for ruthless expansion, extermination and acculturation of indigenous peoples by European settlers in North America. It is a mythology because it seems perfectly coherent, reasonable, and "real" from the inside, but appears strikingly artificial from outside perspectives.¹⁹ A mythology works well as long as it appears to be a closed system of signification, effacing inconsistencies, hypocrisies, and prejudices. In other words, myths, according to Levi-Strauss, satisfy the need for "social cohesion" (Sontag xxv). This is why it is interesting that—tonally inconsistent with what he writes in the rest of the book—Barthes states in the final essay of *Mythologies* that "the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth*" (134).

Barthes does not theorize or operationalize the concept of an "artificial myth" in much depth in *Mythologies*—for the simple reason that it extends beyond his joint-ideological/semiological analysis—but its consequences are far-reaching. The very possibility of an artificial myth loosens the fixity of closed systems. Apparently, there is room for movement, dialogue, and resistance. I take this hinge or dynamic in Barthes' structuralist universe to be the space in which Erdrich pushes against the dominant mythology of Manifest Destiny. But the concept of the "artificial myth" does not suffice completely. The strange thing about the term is that Barthes writes that "artificiality" is characteristic of *all* mythologies (in French, he uses the word "*artificiel*" to refer to both types of myths). The implied difference is that the first is systemic (passive), whereas the latter is consciously constructed by the author of the myth (active). Barthes is primarily thinking of satires, where cultural conventions are put on their head to reveal their contingency. Barthes gives the example of Gustave Flaubert's unfinished satirical work, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881), and writes that Flaubert restores the symbolic order of bourgeois ideology but "has strewn his reconstitution with supplementary ornaments which demystify it" (135). In Barthes, the myth consists of two semiological systems, the *language-object* and the *metalanguage*—(see image). For example, the word, or

¹⁹ From a strict post-structuralist perspective, this point may seem naïve, because we cannot really speak of an "outside." According to Derrida, we are always stuck on the inside, "constantly risking falling back within what is being deconstructed" (*Of Grammatology* 14). Going too deep into Derridean argumentation, however, is a rabbit-hole I do not want to go down in at this point.

signifier, “light” in the *language-object* system is “that which opposes darkness” and the object, or *signified*, can be the glow emanating from my desk lamp. The bundling of the *signifier* and the *signified* is what Barthes calls the “sign” or the “associative total of a concept and an image” (113). This sign encompasses connotations such as “Enlightenment,” “illumination,” “a bright mind,” etc. In the second semiological system, the *metalanguage*, this sign becomes a signifier again, but this time of the mythological speech. That is, “light” becomes a mytheme that does not refer to an object, but imparts, or imposes a certain inflection: “light” is good, whereas “dark” is bad. These mythemes occur clearly in the well-known painting by John Gast, called *American Progress* (1872).

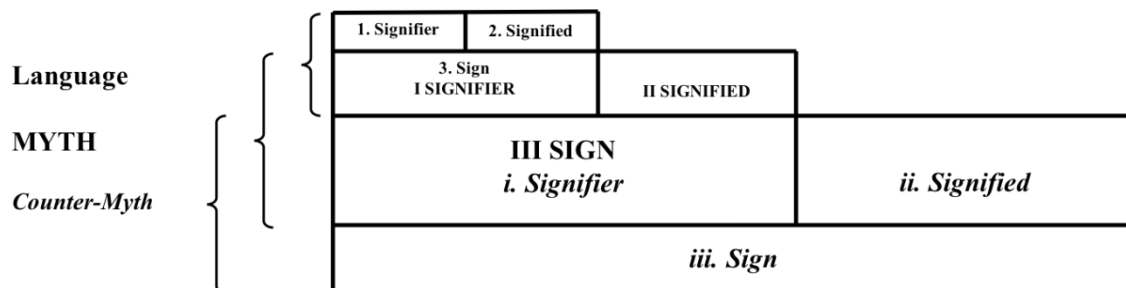


Gast, John. *American Progress*. 1872, Autry Museum of the American West, L.A., Ca.

This painting is a perfect illustration of the symbolic order of Manifest Destiny. The sun on the right side of the canvas shines westward; the rays follow the colonization of the European settlers who bring civilization to the savage people of the west—Native Americans. “Light” is lifted from its *language-object* signification and no longer “simply” signifies the sun, but figures as an instrument in the grammar of settler-colonialism. The “unwritten” in this painting

is not that the West is good and indigenous cultures are bad—so much is obvious. That is, this ethical aspect is not depoliticized in the painting, because the painting is overtly political (though significantly more so today than it was in 1872). The alignment of the rising sun and the settlers walking westward is a naturalization of “American progress”: the colonization of the American West is as natural and inevitable as the rising sun; it is a *teleological necessity*.

By the words “necessity” and “inevitable” I refer precisely to how dominant mythologies impose a closed system. There is no room for resistance, i.e. other mythologies, in the mythology manifested in Gast’s painting. One way of resisting this mythology would be to make another painting where the roles are reversed—the Native people are drenched in light and the settler-colonial people are running back to the darkness of their boats. This reversal, however, would take place on the *language-object* level; the *metalanguage* would still be locked in place. It would reverse the signs, but keep the form, the logic—and indeed the mythology—of Manifest Destiny in place. So how can the *metalanguage* be resisted? This is where Barthes’ “artificial myths” come in. This myth is a third semiological system or a “third chain” (135) in Barthes’ scheme:



Barthes’ scheme gets another tier of signification where the sign of the first mythical system (III SIGN)—which Barthes calls the “form” (116)—becomes the first link in the second mythical system (135). Continuing the example from above, this would mean that the form that unites “light” and “good” is used to signify something else again (*ii. Signified*). That is, the sign of the first myth becomes another signifier. This means that the sign “light as good” becomes: “an ontological justification for settler-colonialism” and is constructed as such. Flaubert’s “archaeological restoration” is made up of the mythical signs of bourgeois culture, or, in the case of Louise Erdrich, she constructs the mythical signs of Manifest Destiny in her poem “Jacklight” but supplements or embellishes them with alternative associations. Suddenly, “light” becomes blinding, clinical, invasive. These “supplementary ornaments” are the symbolic reversals of the artificial myth—and the starting point of this study.

Roland Barthes' most well-known example of the mythical system is that of the black boy saluting on the cover of *Paris-Match*. Barthes writes that the fundamental character of the transition from meaning to form—from *language-object* to its *metalanguage*—is “to be appropriated” (118). This means that the boy no longer simply *means* “boy saluting” but is appropriated to signify something ulterior: French imperialism. This is the standard explanation of Barthes' double semiological system, but the third semiological system of the counter-myth (see figure above) becomes immediately visible in Barthes' own mode of exposure. That is, by displaying or exhibiting the mythological signified, Barthes has turned the sign against itself. Suddenly, the image of the saluting boy—as a composite sign—signifies the opposite (*ii. Signified*). On the cover of *Paris-Match*, the sign evokes the *eternity* of French imperialism, but in Barthes' book it suddenly means the *contingency* of French imperialism. Nowadays, whenever the image of the boy is used, it is used as the third link in the third semiological system (*iii. Sign*) and reminds the viewer of the construction of French imperialism, but in this representation, it carries the traces of those “earlier” semiological systems as well.

In this final section of the chapter I have tried to make clear how symbolic reversals are more than simply supplanting one signified for another but that there is a third semiological system in which the former signified is maintained. It needs to be maintained in order to be resisted. When it comes to ideological analyses or satires, the counter-myth has become clear. Erdrich's counter-hegemonic poetic mythology, however, is much too subtle to be called satirical and the modes of resistance are much more nuanced than I have explained the counter-myth to be up to now. I take the concept of the artificial myth and the third semiological system, however, as a methodological tool with which to analyse Erdrich's writing. In the next chapter, I will begin my analysis of Erdrich's *Jacklight*, exploring and delineating the ways in which she resists the myth of Manifest Destiny.

Chapter 2: Encounter

Jacklight

Even before her debut novel *Love Medicine* was published, Louise Erdrich published her first book of poems, *Jacklight*, in February 1984. The eponymous first poem, “Jacklight,” in the book sets the stage, not only for the poems to come, but for her entire oeuvre that would follow. The poem begins with an epigraph by historian R.W. Dunning:

The same Chippewa word is used both for flirting and hunting game, while another Chippewa word connotes both using force in intercourse and also killing a bear with one's hands. (3)

Erdrich does not include the passage that states what those Chippewa words are. Here, her concern is not morphological, but semantic. She draws attention to connotations, fixating both on divergences and convergences. That is, she points out the stark differences between, hunting, love, violence, and desire, but also unites these opposing aspects into one meaning. This semantic ambiguity signals back to the poem's title, “Jacklight.”

A jacklight is a bright spotlight used in hunting at night to lure animals—taking advantage of their curiosity—before shooting them. The jacklight is commonly regarded to be a form of “cheating” and is illegal in many states in the USA. For Erdrich, the jacklight is a figure that symbolizes the reversal of the very concept of hunting. The notion of hunting as a *chase* is turned around and hunting becomes a form of luring, or, indeed, *seducing*. The word “jacklight” is thereby charged with the Chippewa connotations of the epigraph—both tender and violent. Then the poem itself begins:

We have come to the edge of the woods,
out of brown grass where we slept, unseen,
out of knotted twigs, out of leaves creaked shut,
out of hiding. (3)

It is clear that “we” refers to the entities who are being hunted or lured by the jacklight. They are drawn out of their hiding place where they were “unseen.” Their hiding place was a place of safety; it was “where we slept.” The “edge of the woods” thereby becomes the edge of a

horizon—the threshold of a circumference. The creaking leaves are a door made useless by the light. She continues:

At first the light wavered, glancing over us.
 Then it clenched to a fist of light that pointed,
 searched out, divided us.
 Each took the beams like direct blows the heart answers.
 Each of us moved forward alone. (3)

The glancing light is like a set of eyes, fixating their bodies, but immediately becomes a fist that divides them. In other words, when they were unseen in the forest, they were—what Frederic Jameson called—a collective self. In fact, the phrase “out of” from the first stanza, implies a certain integration: they *were* the forest. The way Erdrich begins the poem resonates with another poem by a Native American writer, Frank Prewett, whose “The Red-Man” opens with the line: “From wilderness remote he breaks” (Niatum 1). In Prewett’s poem, the word “breaks” signals this idea that people are broken from their land—like a twig from a tree. This is the idea one gets from Erdrich’s poem, too. The comparison between the two poems also highlights the thinly veiled allegory that Erdrich is constructing: the figures in the poem that constitute the “we” can be read as the Native American people who are displaced by the European settlers who shine their jacklight (colonial gaze) into the forest. The poem thereby becomes a historical poem, symbolizing the initial colonial encounter that caused the fundamental displacement of Native Americans.

Following this reading, the phrases “searched out” and “divided us” become significant on two levels: metaphysical and historical. That is, firstly, they can refer to ontological domination where the lines of humanity are redrawn, conceptions of the Self are disrupted, and an indigenous *épistèmè* is broken down and replaced by a Western paradigm. It is a psychological displacement that dislodges a worldview. “Searched out” is a desire to know or comprehend. The poem gives no clue to what the hunters want other than the obvious desire to *consume*. The jacklight intersects sight and eating: to be seen is to be consumed. The jacklight is a fixating gaze, that paralyzes and objectifies. The gaze divides them into rigid individuals, isolated from themselves, each other, and the woods in which they live.

This merges into the second level of displacement. Historically, Native American people were “searched out” and “divided” in two ways: *removal* and *assimilation*. The removal policies—and especially the Indian Removal Act of 1830—was a way of legalizing the ethnic

cleansing of Native American people by the US Government (Hixson 63). The Native American people were initially driven west of the Mississippi River, but ultimately cordoned off to designated spaces: reservations. These removals were justified and rationalized within the conceptual frame of Manifest Destiny. In his chapter on the Indian Removal, Walter L. Hixson writes that “Americans left no cultural space for Indians under the fantasy frame wherein it was the white man’s providential destiny to take sole command of the continent” (65). The sense of geographical displacement becomes stronger in the next few lines of Erdrich’s poem:

We have come to the edge of the woods,
drawn out of ourselves by this night sun, (3)

The words “drawn out of ourselves” connects the historical and geographical displacement to the ontological or psychological displacement: they lose their identities by being uprooted from the woods. The western conception of subjectivity is that of a single consciousness—i.e. the humanist ego discussed at length in the previous chapter. Native American societies, though a hackneyed observation, are much more communally oriented. Subjectivity is an integrated self, defined by the relationship to the land and the family relations of the tribe.²⁰ Writing about the history of the Cherokee, James M. Mooney refers to the process of Indian removal as a program of “systematic hunts” (124).

Indeed, the process of removal leans on the “chase” aspect of the hunt. Still, the muddled history of Indian Treaties drawn up by the Bureau of Indian Affairs shines a light on what Erdrich means by the seductive dimension of hunting in her poem. The Indian Treaties that legalized—and thereby justified—the Removal Acts had to be signed by Indian Chiefs. However, treaty-violation was rife and often, as Hixson notes, “their implications [were] not clear to the indigenous partners” (45). The chiefs were either misinformed or simply pressured into signing treaties that determined the fate not only of their own tribe members but of hundreds of tribes all over the North American continent that they were supposed to represent.

²⁰ This observation is hackneyed because it risks being interpreted within the narrative frame of the “noble savage” where Native Americans are figured as “children of the forest” who are more pure than the degenerate Western societies who have become alienated from the land and each other. This narrative still interprets Native American notions of subjectivity within a Western epistemology and limits the full range of indigenous worldviews. This does not mean, however, that the observation is necessarily wrong, but that it is important to tread carefully and provide a subtle analysis.

This way, the Indian chiefs were persuaded or seduced into signing treaties that would eventually not be beneficial to them, and thereby all Native American people, at all. In fact, historian James Wilson called the entire treaty-making process “a cynical ploy” that was just used to give Native American nations a sense of “national independence” (290-91).

The second form of historical displacement was assimilation, a process initiated after the Removal Acts turned out to be inefficient. The US Government switched strategy and turned to a program of assimilation. This happened in two major ways: The General Allotment Act of 1887 and the Native American Boarding School Programs.²¹ The former program was an endeavour that subdivided reservation land into 160-acre individual plots. This form of displacement closely parallels what Patrick Wolfe claims is the quintessential appurtenance of settler colonialism, that is, that it “destroys to replace” (388). The land was cut into a grid pattern, people who lived in close, circular tribal villages, or were nomadically organized, were forced to cut ties with their tribal membership, becoming nuclear families, and adhere to the Western model of agriculture. The seductive dimension of the hunt becomes even stronger as the allotment process took place on a personal level; the narrative was that Indians could climb up out of their “collective inertia” by stepping onto the path towards the American Dream—and thereby *becoming* Americans (Wolfe 400). In reality, most Native Americans were living in poverty and had little choice but to sell the land, reducing tribal land to a third of its already reduced state in under fifty years. Unlike the Removal Acts, the Allotment Acts created the appearance that it was by their own free choice that the Native Americans gave up their land, but it really came down to forceful manipulation, just like the luring device of the jacklight. Hixson writes that, through the Allotment Act, “Americans sought to transform Indian gender relations by making men into farmers, women into domestics, and removing Indian children from the family altogether” (142). The removal of Indian children refers to the rationalization of the process of assimilation that tried to “get the Indian out of the blanket and into trousers” (Gates, qtd. in Wilson 299). Young children were taken from their homes and brought to boarding schools where they were taught to be “civilized.” They were prohibited from speaking their own language and instructed that their tribal religions were pagan. Boarding schools further dislodged the tribal and familial relations, initiating a traumatic rift between the children

²¹ In short, the General Allotment Act was a program where concepts of “property” and “ownership” were forced unto the Native American people by breaking up the tribal land into individual plots of land and allotting them to Native American families who were then able to sell their land to white people or live on it.

and their parents who were often unable to communicate after the children returned from the schools.

The line “each of us moved forward alone” from Erdrich’s poem is charged with this violent individualization of Native Americans. They were forced, in other words, to become humanist egos, dispossessing their geographical, cultural, and ontological heritage. As will become important later on, Erdrich’s concerns in her poems carry over to her novels as well. For instance, in “The World’s Greatest Fishermen”—the first story in Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*—Albertine Johnson reflects on how she grew up “next to the old land my great-grandparents were allotted when the government decided to turn Indians into farmers” (12). This passage takes the cultural trauma from its poetic universalism and places it in a specific, personal setting, especially since Albertine’s great-grandparents, Rushes Bear and the original Kashpaw are also characters in the book, rather than only ancestral names. A few pages on, Albertine recounts the story of how Rushes Bear “had let the government put Nector in school, but hidden Eli” (19). Nector and Eli are Rushes Bear’s two youngest sons who are “searched out” by the US Government to be put in boarding schools. Albertine says, “Nector came back from boarding school knowing white reading and writing, while Eli knew the woods” (19). This is the first instance where Louise Erdrich expands a metaphor across her writing. As in “Jacklight,” the woods are a place of safety and connection. It is certainly no coincidence, symbolically, that Rushes Bear hides Eli in “the root cellar dug beneath the floor” (19). In contrast to his displaced and uprooted brother, Nector, Eli is planted in the depths of the earth.

All these dimensions—historical and metaphysical—ring through the first two stanzas of “Jacklight.” The words “searched out” and “divided us” are charged with historical and ontological displacement and dispossession—both on the intersection of seduction and violence, the core dynamic of the jacklight. The poem continues:

We smell them behind it
 but they are faceless, invisible.
 We smell the raw steel of their gun barrels,
 mink oil on leather, their tongues of sour barley.
 We smell their mothers buried chin-deep in wet dirt.
 We smell their fathers with scoured knuckles,
 teeth cracked from hot marrow.
 We smell their sisters of crushed dogwood, bruised apples,
 of fractured cups and concussions of burnt books. (3)

The repetition of “We smell” instigates a grotesque catalogue of a counter-gaze. It is crucial how the hunters are “faceless.” Up to now, Erdrich has reconstructed the symbolic order of the dominant mythology: The White Man brings the light to the darkness of the pagan people. The jacklight embodies the light of civilization; the light of Christianity; the light of reason. But enforcing the first symbolic reversal of Erdrich’s counter-myth, the light is blinding, making the hunters “faceless, invisible.” Something that is supposed to bring clarity, sight, order, is now polarizing, chaotic, and opaque. This is the initial step in Erdrich’s symbolic reversal. She uses the Catholic *sign* of light—the secondary sign of Barthes’ scheme—as a signifier that now, in the third semiological system, signifies something adverse and hostile. Barthes’ scheme is crucial as it reveals the complexity of Erdrich’s poetic mythology. It is not simply the case that Erdrich reemploys the signifier to signify something else—that the light used to signify something positive and now something negative. Rather, the sign of light *as something positive*, now signifies something negative. Crucially, *the trace of positivity is maintained in the seductive dimension of the jacklight*.

The confrontation of the entities who have come out of the forest and the faceless entities who stand behind the jacklight symbolizes the clash of contesting mythologies. Roland Barthes writes that one of the principal figures of myth is *identification*. He writes that people who reside in the myth are “unable to imagine the Other” (*Mythologies* 152). He continues that “if [the Self] comes face to face with [the Other], he blinds himself, ignores and denies him, or else transforms him into himself” (152). This is exactly what is happening in the encounter of “Jacklight.” It is like both mythologies have geographical limits and that living inside a mythology is like living in a dome. The edge of the woods—where the poem takes place—is the place where the edges of the domes meet, but the insides are reflective: the speakers of the poems cannot see the faces, they are blinded; and the people behind the jacklight—dividing the speakers into individuals—can only see themselves. Even though the people behind the jacklight are indeed invisible in Erdrich’s poem, there are some elements that shine through the cracks of the speakers’ phenomenological horizon—their smell. Continuing the reading where the “we” figures are American Indians, they have come not only to the edge of the woods, but to the edge of their myth, their reality. The idea that myths are closed systems is disintegrating and the jacklight shines into the forest like a spectre on the threshold. David Lloyd, who takes the Derridean concept of the “threshold” describes it as the “vestigial remnants of a dissolving boundary” (164). Erdrich’s symbolic reversal of “light” is situated on the in-between of this boundary between the settler-colonial myth on the one hand and the Ojibwe myth on the other.

But the clash of both myths is not new. Erdrich continues the poem, writing “We have come here too long” (4). This line refers back to the entire history of settler-colonialism in the Americas and initiates a narrative reversal—or *volta*—that builds on the more subterranean symbolic reversal. The final stanza of the poem is:

It is their turn now,
 their turn to follow us. Listen,
 they put down their equipment.
 It is useless in the tall brush.
 And now they take the first steps, not knowing
 how deep the woods are and lightless.
 How deep the woods are. (3)

The settler/hunters put down their jacklight. This time, *they* are being seduced into the forest and out of their own dome-like myth. They are lured into the heart of darkness that typifies the margins of their reality. Of course, the settler/hunters have *also* come to the edge of the woods, but the centre of their reality is behind them, in the bright open spaces of straight roads and logically ordered townships. Smell and hearing are the senses that help you through the forest, but the settler/hunters are helpless without sight, emphasizing their dependence on light and evoking the intellectual turn in Western history to empirical sciences which instigated the widespread belief—or assumption—that facts about reality are to be delineated from observation, sight (Chalmers 5). Again, Erdrich does not reject the characterization of Native Americans as living in darkness but claims the darkness. The entire poem builds on the dynamic that settlers are human hunters, and that Native Americans are the animals who are hunted. Like animals—who do not have the Light of Reason—the Native Americans live in the darkness of the forest, and it is clear that the thing being reversed is the value of the symbolic order, not the symbolic order itself.

The poem “Jacklight” represents a major concern in Erdrich’s writing. This is the issue of conflicting worlds, realities, and—indeed—myths. Clearly, the relationship between the hunters on the one hand and the speakers of the poem on the other is also the relationship between the nation and the region. This confrontation manifests itself in the poem on the boundary between the forest on the one hand and the plains on the other, i.e. the edge of the woods. Boundaries, limits, and the determination of a Self on one side of the boundary and the Other on the other side, is the core appurtenance of myth. For Barthes, the key feature of the

confrontation between Self and Other is that the Self (in this case the dominant, or sovereign, Self) extends beyond its own borders where “any otherness is reduced to sameness” (152). That is to say, the light that shines into the forest and divides and searches out the Native Americans in the forest, can be read as an attempt to expand the sameness of the dominant Self. Indeed, as I have argued, Erdrich’s poem refers to the historical enterprise of relocation, removal, and acculturation—all of which are forms of either ignoring, blinding oneself of difference or enforcing sameness onto the Other.

Fetterley and Pryse write about the issue of “entering another’s home, village, or region” in *Writing out of Place* and argue—on the basis of an analysis of another Native American writer, Zitkala-Sa—that the violent intrusion of the Other into one’s region (symbolised, in this case, by the blinding light of the jacklight itself) takes away one’s subjectivity and reduces him or her to an “object of scrutiny” (241). Indeed, the edge of the woods is also the entrance to a region and rather than being externally defined as a “hunting-ground”—something to be exploited by the state, Erdrich’s speakers make a claim of sovereignty.

Runaways

As discussed above, myths are closed systems. In the sense that they are closed, they can also be said to *enclose*. They draw a circumference around a group of people who believe in the same myth. This approach to myth resonates with Benedict Anderson’s famous definition of the nation as an imagined community. In his book, *Imagined Communities*, Anderson states that a nation “is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). Nations are imagined to be limited because, Anderson claims, nations always exist in relation to other nations. Anderson is of use here because his definition of the nation takes it from the realm of abstraction and institutions and places it in the minds of people. Thus, the nation becomes something a person carries with him or herself in everyday life. It is a defining feature of one’s phenomenological field—the mythological dome in which they live. One imagines sameness, a shared Self. This Self extends out towards the confrontation of *difference*. The colonial encounter on the frontier between settlers and Native American people is the limit of sameness and the face-to-face confrontation of difference.

In relation to Barthes, this means that not every myth is a nation, but that every nation is a myth. Something that is not directly visible in Barthes, but certainly crucial to the concept of myth is that the question of falsity is not relevant. Anderson, too, emphasizes that the fact that the nation is invented does not necessarily mean that it is a falsity (6). This is important because it would presuppose honest and dishonest nations—nations that are imagined and nations that

are somehow “authentic.” Similarly, myths are a necessity. Without them, life would disintegrate. Myths give shape to reality in the form of categories that—nevertheless—risk effacing or drowning out sections of reality that also make a claim to a presence. This issue stands at the centre of Erdrich’s “Jacklight” and is fully embodied by the symbol of the jacklight itself. The jacklight represents the expansion of one myth and thereby the limitation of the other.

Up to now, I have been talking about different kinds of boundaries—geographical, ontological, conceptual, political, and regional. Erdrich’s symbolic reversals are set to blur these boundaries. In fact, even the boundaries that separate these different kinds of boundaries (e.g. geographical, ontological, etc.) are blurred. A strong symbol for the breakdown of barriers in Native American poetry is water—or more precisely, *floods*. Water represents a borderless reality, but floods represent the violent transgression of these sedimented boundaries. This image is present in the works of contemporary Native American poets such as Esther Belin, Natalie Diaz, and Layli Long Soldier. Interestingly, the symbolism is rooted in the poets’ regional reality. Esther Belin, a poet from the Navajo Nation writes about floods that have actually occurred in the Navajo region where she lives; Natalie Diaz writes about the degeneration of the Colorado River that runs through the Mojave Indian Reservation where she lives.²² But the symbol of the flood works both ways. It can represent both destruction and liberation. A symbol that also recurs often in Native American poetry is that of dams—for instance, in the works of Sherwin Bitsui and M.L. Smoker. Dams almost exclusively symbolize rigid structures from colonial intrusion that limit the natural fluidity of water and—in extension—the way of life of Native American people. Paula Gunn Allen also noted the frequent occurrence of “dams” in indigenous writing, “which,” she states, “in the traditionals’ view kills the water” (84).²³ On the one hand, dams impede the ability of water to flood and

²² The word “Colorado” comes from “Colored Red” and was used to name the river for its bright crimson hue. The Colorado River used to transport sediments into the lower basin, fertilizing the land on which the Mojave Indians live(d). The construction of dams and diversions have taken the sediments out of the river which—in effect—has given the river a bright green hue. Mojave poet Natalie Diaz mourns this development in her poetry collection *When My Brother was an Aztec* (2013).

²³ Not only is this type of imagery not entirely unique to Erdrich, it is not unique to Native American poetry either. It is a broader trope that recurs throughout world literature and specifically regional literature where regional landscapes, for instance in Irish and Dutch regional literature, are altered by a dominant force—often the state—that “modernizes” the land by building dams or pipelines or highways that alter the “lay of the land” and thereby the identity of the people who live on it. I leave this avenue of inquisition open due to reasons of scope,

flow free, but on the other hand, dams can cause floods—accounting for the divergent meanings of floods in Native American poetry as both liberating and destructive. Moreover, the same phenomenon is differently addressed by Tacey M. Atsitty who, instead of water, uses the image of roiling lava to express the dynamic between the rigid boundaries of colonialism and the suppressed openness of indigenous epistemologies. The lava that Atsitty is referring to is connected to the Shiprock mountain on the high-desert plain of the Navajo Nation, New Mexico—a cultural and religious landmark for the Tangle clan of Navajo people of which Atsitty is part. The point here is that the poets embed their poetic or symbolic reality in their regional surroundings and the other way around. The poets use historical events (the particular development of a dam), and its geographical consequences (floods and ecological degeneration) and connect them to personal and communal experience and through that connection create a definition of humanity. That is, what is a human in relation to land, to other people and all living being? In other words, it is the creation of a mythical relation.

So when Louise Erdrich writes about “this night of rising water” in her poem “A Love Medicine,” the first poem in her cycle called “Runaways”—a large section in *Jacklight*—it is worth considering the importance of the fact that she is writing about the Red River. The Red River of the North runs from Lake Winnipeg in Canada to the south, forms the natural border between North Dakota and Minnesota, and runs straight through Louise Erdrich’s birthplace, Wahpeton. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, the Red River has flooded—with the Red River flood of 1950 being one of the most destructive. The poem itself is about a woman named Theresa who is physically attacked by a masculine figure in a Dodge on a rainy night in Wahpeton during a flood. Here, too, the antagonistic figure is faceless. After the attack, Theresa is found in a ditch by the speaker of the poem, her sister. Together, they “wait for the night to take us” (8). In many ways, this poem could be read as a prequel to “Jacklight.” The poem can be read as one of the examples of when following a bright light ends in violence and thereby plays on that same double meaning of the Ojibwe word for hunting and flirting. The man in the Dodge is described as “her man,” implying that they had some kind of loving relationship that turned bad. Even the phrase “search out” from “Jacklight” returns:

She laughs and leaves her man in his Dodge.

He shoves off to search her out. (7)

but—as with many of the arguments in this study—through this openness I aim to inspire more thought than can be worked out in one study.

The attack on Theresa is paralleled by the flooding of the Red River. It is clear from the poem that the invasion of Theresa's body by an external force, the man, is symbolically connected to the way that water bursts through the shores and invades the land:

And later, at the crest of the flood,
when the pilings are jarred from their sockets
and pitch into the current,
she steps against a fistwork of a man. (7)

The violence of the flood and the fists of the man seem congruent. Both connotations of floods—liberating and destructive—are present in the poem. Even though it functions as an invasive force, the speaker also writes that “this dragonfly, my sister, / she belongs more than I / to this night of rising water” (7). In this one line, Theresa is aligned to an animal, the night, and the flood—and she is—of course—a woman; it no longer seems a coincidence that her sister found her in a ditch that was “gagging on rain” (7). Theresa is a liminal figure, but not only due to the attack by the man. That is, she is not thrown out of the circumference of reality, but dwells there naturally. After the attack, “she feels her way home in the dark” (7). The symbolic reversal from “Jacklight” is deepened and expanded. Erdrich adds touch as a sense to navigate the darkness (in addition to hearing and smell from “Jacklight”). Like the figures in “Jacklight,” Theresa is at home in the woods and the darkness of the night. Yet, it is no coincidence that the speaker says her sister is a dragonfly. Like the seething insects who are attracted by the “blue neon bug traps of the dairy bar” (8), Theresa is seduced by the man in his Dodge. Here too, Theresa has become an “object of scrutiny,” and the region itself is symbolized in Theresa's body—and vice versa.

This congruence of story, myth and place; the effort to imbue a space with a symbolic spirit is at bottom a claim for a national and ontological presence. It is an attempt to wrest landmarks—such as the Red River, but ultimately the land itself back from colonial possession into the hands of the indigenous people. However, this must not be overstated. It would be too simplistic to reduce Erdrich's poems to nothing but a symbol for colonialism, but the clash between two worlds—present both in “Jacklight” and “A Love Medicine”—reveals an emerging dynamic that typifies her writing. This dynamic—of myths colliding—makes the writing of Erdrich inherently transnational. But the transnational situation of the Americas is very peculiar. With regard to the demarcation of nations, Anderson writes that even “the most

messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation” (7). This may be true on a global scale, but when it comes to the settler-colonization of the North American continent, Anderson’s description seems an accurate slogan for the myth of Manifest Destiny. The only difference is that the word “join” is only one part of a choice. The Native American people, as Paula Gunn Allen rightly notes, “were faced with a choice between assimilation and extinction” (84). Above, I have argued how the figures in “Jacklight” are either *seduced* into assimilation or *hunted* into extinction. Both movements are modes of expansion on the side of Manifest Destiny and an attempt at absorbing the region into the definition of the nation. Indeed, the defining feature of Manifest Destiny as a myth of a nation is that it interprets reality in strictly teleological terms, leading to the belief in a preordained right to “destroy to replace” (Wolfe 388). In other words, it is inherent to the imagined community of Manifest Destiny to stretch its borders and eradicate otherness. This is the jacklight shining into the forest, dividing the people; these are the blue neon bug traps that trick Theresa into stepping into the Dodge.

In the introductory chapter, I suggested the alignment of the phrase “the edge of the woods” to the town of Wahpeton which geographically matches Erdrich’s descriptions. In the poem “Family Reunion,” Erdrich takes her work to another regional space that has become synonymous with her work: The Turtle Mountains. It is commonly accepted that the fictional Little No Horse Reservation on which most of Louise Erdrich’s novels take place is modelled after the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation (“A History of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians” 23; Beidler and Barton 10)—part of the Turtle Mountain plateau that is situated on the border of North Dakota and the Canadian province of Manitoba, five hundred kilometres northwest of Wahpeton. Interestingly, however, much like Wahpeton, the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation is situated on a deciduous forest plateau, surrounded by long stretches of open plains. The image of the “edge of the woods” seems equally applicable to the place Erdrich grew up on and the land of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians.

“Family Reunion” takes the reader along that five-hundred-kilometre drive from Wahpeton to the Turtle Mountains: “full cooler in the tank, Ray sogging the beer / as I solemnly chauffeur us through the bush” (9). The cycle of poems collected in “Runaways” is about people who have left the circumference of their myth, their nation, behind and made a life off the reservation. “Family Reunion” is precisely about the return home—re-entering their old myth. Ray and the speaker of the poem—whom one silently suspects to be an Erdrich-like figure—drive “up the backroads” to reach that place “somewhere in the bush near Saint John”

(9).²⁴ The reservation is clearly described as a liminal, and peripheral place, but as the poem progresses Ray and the speaker resettle, redrawing the lines of centrality and periphery. A day after the bodies of Ray and the speaker have arrived at their family's home on the reservation, their spirits follow: "somehow we find our way back" (10). The poem is about reintegrating into a particular space, but also about reintegrating the mind in the body. Life off the reservation not only displaces the people physically, but also psychologically. The clash of two worlds, then, is not only represented between two groups of people in this poem, but within one body—particularly Ray's, whose alcoholism tears his head from his body. Like most of Erdrich's poems, the final stanza signals a cyclical restoration: "Uncle Ray sings an old song to the body that pulls him toward home" (10). Again, in "Jacklight" the figures were "drawn out of ourselves," "divided," and "searched out." In this poem, the boundaries are lifted, and mind, body, and place fluidify and reconnect.

Most novels that Erdrich has written are set on the fictional Little No Horse Reservation. Her novels are known for their numerous characters that recur throughout her work. The extreme complexity of the character networks represents the interpretation of a collective subjectivity that typifies Erdrich's worldview. It is the reality "up the backroads," deep in the woods where no polarizing light shines that divides the people. The characters in her novels are undivided and it often takes an external force, e.g. the jacklight, or what I will later start referring to as the Wiindigoo spirit, to wrench the people apart. But Erdrich has visited the consequences of geographical and psychological displacement in some of her novels. In books such as *Shadow Tag* (2010), and her most recent *Future Home of the Living God* (2017), characters live off the reservation. *Shadow Tag* is about a dysfunctional family in Minneapolis and the usual catalogue of more than thirty characters is suddenly brought down to five, a man and a woman, and their three children. The daughter in the family, Riel, feels disconnected from her identity and needs her mother's books to learn about her heritage. Similarly, Cedar, the protagonist of *Future Home of the Living God*, is a Chippewa woman who was adopted by white parents and chooses to embrace Catholicism "in an effort to get those connections. I wanted an extended family—a whole parish of friends" (6). Both the characters and the books themselves are isolated islands in Erdrich's larger oeuvre.

The poetic mythology that Erdrich is setting up in her poems—and in extension her novels—is one where darkness is not necessarily something to be eradicated by light. Schematically, the reality of Manifest Destiny consists of a centre that emanates a light to its

²⁴ Saint John is a small town a few miles to the east of the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation.

margins. From the perspective of Manifest Destiny, all of reality must be engulfed in light, and in all its connotative derivatives: Enlightenment, light of reason, the clarity of logic, and the light of Christianity. The people in the margins who are figured to live in darkness are the people with whom Erdrich is concerned. She recreates—or in Barthes’ words, restores—the light/dark opposition as conceptualized by the settler-colonial worldview, but states that her characters belong to the darkness, the night. Erdrich builds this into her poems in a very subtle way. In “Indian Boarding School: The Runaways,” the young children who ran away from their boarding school take refuge in the darkness, and when “the lame guard strikes a match” it “makes the dark less tolerant” (11). In “Francine’s Room,” the speaker retreats to her room and says, “I come here to be in the dark” (15). Throughout Erdrich’s poems, darkness represents possibility. Light is fixating, polarizing, and limiting. In the darkness the harsh boundaries fluidify and it reveals a certain excess. This excess is an openness, an open door in the circumference of one’s horizon. One thinks of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s claim that “what can be said at all can be said clearly; and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence” (23). The light shines on that which can be said, but the darkness still holds secrets that cannot be talked about. Indeed, some things cannot be said, but that does not mean they do not exist. This is the darkness of Erdrich’s poetic mythology. It is a place of refuge from glaring eyes, a realm where two people can be one, where people can turn into animals, and where people are part of the land.

In “Dear John Wayne,” the speaker of the poem laments “the land that was once flesh” (12). John Wayne—who, for many Native American artists symbolizes the ultimate humanist ego who brings the light of civilization to the frontier by effortlessly killing off Indians—is used in the poem to personify the man behind the jacklight, the man in the Dodge, and the many men who appear in Erdrich’s work and disrupt the darkness. The poem is about a group of young people who go to a drive-in picture show. They watch a John Wayne movie. John Wayne’s face is projected onto the large screen and he says: “*Everything you see belongs to us*” (12). The light from the screen shines on the cars and the land, turning it into “white fields”—the screen itself becomes a jacklight, something both violent and alluring—but as the credits start rolling, the fields return to the “true-to-life dark” (12-3). Erdrich gives a symbolic face to the invisible people behind the jacklight. John Wayne’s face is so bright that it makes the fields white. Not only does it imply that the land has been taken by white people, but the word “white” also seems to refer to “blank,” “empty” lands that, indeed, “was once flesh.” The discursive bond between the land and the people, that is, the flesh that connects them, is erased by the brightness of John Wayne’s “horizon of teeth” (12). The light of the cinema screen

erases the discursive network, i.e. the myth, but like Ray, who returned to his body during in “Family Reunion,” the people in the drive-in cinema go “back in our skins” once the movie is over.

The Light of Our Bones

Up to now, I have talked primarily about light and dark, but this one symbolic reversal instigates a domino effect that revalues the entire textual fabric within which Erdrich inscribes her poetic mythology. Darkness is no longer just a symbol, but a spiritual space. Oddly, in the poem “The Levelers,” Erdrich writes that there is some kind of light that shines in the darkness. As the two lovers walk “into the night trees” they see that “the branches are now lit within” and they are guided by “the light of our bones” (24). This dim light that shines from within foreshadows one of the primary images of an original fire that Erdrich will develop thirty years later in the eponymously titled poetry collection *Original Fire*—discussed at length in chapter four. It seems to refer precisely to the idea that the light of the West drowns out a dimmer light; that there is a kind of spiritual knowing that exceeds systematized reason and logic. It is, in other words, something that cannot be said. It is a fragile light that is negated once talked about. Talking about it means defining it and once it is defined, circumscribed, it is surrounded, closed, and the excess negated. The excess of darkness seems strongly connected to a type of visionary imagination—something akin to John Keats’ negative capability, although less concerned with aesthetics and more related to one’s every day phenomenological experience as somehow confusing, uncertain, and unsolidified.

This visionary imagination has been described by Kiowa writer and academic N. Scott Momaday as the “double vision” (81). In an essay called “Native American Attitudes to the Environment,” Momaday claims that Native Americans understand the relationship between humans and the land in two ways—two visions where “one is physical and the other is imaginative” (81). The former is a sensory and tactile connection situated in a time and place, whereas the latter has to do with the narratives that connect people to the land, the discursive interpretation of the land that generates meaning and identity of a certain people in a certain place. Momaday’s description of the imaginative vision connects Barthes’ concept of a mythology as a discursive horizon that generates meaning to Erdrich’s darkness as a spiritual space where meaning is not “purely rational” (Momaday 80). The imaginative connection, Momaday claims, is one that is established through “investment” (83). Momaday thereby describes a kind of regional specificity where the lay of the land shapes and is shaped by the people who live there.

In Erdrich's writing, the imaginative vision creates a space of refuge from the glaring jacklight. The forest on the Turtle Mountain plateau comes to represent this space and the "edge of the woods" acts as the circumference of that space. Within this space, darkness is soothing, and light is blinding. It is, in that sense, a Heart of Darkness but without the accusatory, derogatory, and otherwise negative connotations. The individual who stands on the edge, shining his jacklight into the forest, figures as the threat to this sovereign place. I will discuss and explore the nature of this figure in more depth in chapter four.

In this chapter I have read the poem "Jacklight" as an exemplary model of Erdrich's concerns as a poet and novelist. Naturally, my analysis does not exhaust Erdrich's poetics, but it gives a clear idea of how a certain dynamic recurs in and informs both the form and content of Erdrich's writing. Many other poems in Erdrich's first poetry collection *Jacklight* have subtle inferences of the light/dark reversal that pop up, instigating a broader reversal that revalues the symbolic order that separates humans from animals, men from women, identity from place, and mind from body—forms of displacement that Erdrich tries to heal. In the next chapter I will turn to Erdrich's second poetry collection *Baptism of Desire*.

Chapter 3: Consumption

Baptism of Desire: *The Cloud of Unknowing*

In the previous chapter, I focused on the *encounters* between contesting mythologies. In this chapter, I shift the focus more to how Erdrich deals with one mythology being encapsulated—or *consumed*—by another. I agree with Dean Rader’s observation in his essay on Erdrich’s first two poetry collections that “the *Jacklight* poems begin inward and radiate outward ... whereas the poems from *Baptism of Desire* seem to begin outward in a system like the church or Catholicism and spiral inward (103). The poems of *Jacklight* are written from a close, communal and tribal perspective that moves outward to the edge of the woods until an *encounter* with otherness occurs. In *Baptism of Desire*, on the other hand, otherness is already a frame that surrounds the poems. Indeed, as Rader writes, this frame is largely the frame of Catholicism. This is also the main reason that this collection has been largely neglected in critical responses to Erdrich’s oeuvre. As Connie A. Jacobs writes, “teachers and students often find the poetry in *Baptism of Desire* difficult to understand because of the references to Catholic rituals and the emphasis on redemption, prayer, and personal revelations” (“Primary Works” 15). Erdrich reflected on this lack of interest and understanding in a sneering meta-reference in her novel *Shadow Tag*, where one of the main characters, Gil—a painter, says: “don’t paint Indians. The subject wins” (37). This phrase, “the subject wins,” refers to the fact that many readers of Native American fiction read it for the culture, not the artist, and that therefore the artist will always be hyphenated to their cultural heritage: “You’ll never be an artist. You’ll be an American Indian artist. There will be a cap on your career” (*Shadow Tag* 37). This, too, is what—in Fetterley and Pryse’s terminology—could reduce Erdrich’s writing from “regionalist literature” to “local-colour writing.” Local-colour writing confirms and reaffirms the expectations—in this case—of the dominant discourse’s conceptualization of “Indianness” and thereby encapsulates it from the outside. But at this point it also becomes visible how the difference between regionalist literature as interrogative and local-colour writing as affirmative is also situated in the eye of the beholder—and in the literary scholar.

Naturally, another study could chart the Catholic symbolism in this collection, but this study is interested in Erdrich’s personal appropriation of those symbols. As Erdrich spirals from the Catholic frame inward to her personal experience, I claim she continues the resistance of her personal poetic mythology. Unlike Rader, who refers to this appropriation as Erdrich’s “sites of unification” (103), I lay more emphasis on the disruptive, resisting dimension of her mythology. Admittedly, Erdrich’s relation to Catholicism seems to be one of understatement.

This is not to say that she writes around her subjects or hides her convictions, but that her poems read more like whispers rather than shouts. Her work is not typified by dissonance and fragmentary disruption. There are no exclamation marks in her lines. This is part of her poetic mythology; in addition to form and content, the tone of her work prefers the gentle and continuous over the loud and the fragmentary—as the jacklight does. Her novels—and even some of her poetry—follows the realist mode of writing. Indeed, her writing is focussed most on “mending,” “healing,” and “unifying” not only her characters, but also language itself. It is hard to argue that the many different stories in *Love Medicine* are a collage of dissonant postmodern vignettes. But as I have argued above, the act of re-centring the peripheral automatically leads to some disruption of the dominant structure, i.e. anti-western and non-western frames tend to share many characteristics. So as Erdrich is expanding and deepening the symbolic network of her poetic mythology in *Baptism of Desire*, no symbol from the Catholic frame is left unscathed; Erdrich is eating her way out.

The dark space of the forest—a sign developed throughout the previous chapter—is immediately evoked in the two epigraphs of *Baptism of Desire*. The first epigraph is from a text called “The Cloud of Unknowing” and is a fragment that informs the reader to meet your loved ones “in this cloud, in this darkness.” I have already shown how “light” and “knowledge” are synonymous in the reconstructed symbolic order of Erdrich’s poetic mythology. To shine a light on something means to understand it, to comprehend—and in effect—to surround it, encapsulate, and objectify it. This light—the light of the jacklight—eradicates a kind of knowing or feeling that is only possible in the dark. The “cloud of unknowing” evokes the antithesis of the jacklight—the dark space of Erdrich’s poetic mythology. The cloud disrupts sight and knowing, but it is the place where lovers meet. Already, the symbolic order that separates “thought” from “feeling” is reconstructed.

The first poem of *Baptism of Desire*, “Fooling God,” is all about the subversion of God’s eye. Immediately the Catholic frame, the presence of God, hangs over the speaker like an invasive force that eradicates all personal secrets and mysticism. The Catholic sign of God’s omnipotence is not interpreted as moral guidance or safe sanctity, but as Foucauldian surveillance. The speaker does not find refuge in God’s presence but feels claustrophobic. Indeed, the figure of the jacklight returns through another symbolic reversal where God’s eye is revalued as something negative. Again, Erdrich recreates the frame of the dominant discourse and teases it apart by small, subtle reversals. She wants to escape from God’s devouring sight: “I must become small and hide where he cannot reach” and “I must become very large and block his sight,” but she must “also be careful and laugh when he laughs” (3).

Unlike the encounters from *Jacklight*, the Erdrich-like character is already fully drenched in light. Her body has been divided, her role assigned, and her identity has become a performance. The following poems continue the desire for refuge. In “Saint Claire,” the speaker longs back to a state of non-being and has no mercy for the God “who introduced us to this hunger” (7). In “Avila,” the speaker, Rodrigo, reminisces better times and says to his sister that his love for her is sincere “and God has nothing to do with it” (10). In “The Visit,” the speaker thinks back of a time when “there was no body to obstruct us from each other” (11). In all these poems, there is a longing to a bygone time—a period before God—when intersubjectivity, love, and security still existed. Here, too, the characters are “betrayed by light” (13) and reduced under “the sun, the life that consumes us” (18). Like the jacklight, the presence of God is alluring, but ultimately leads to betrayal and being consumed, eaten by the Other. God’s eyes are “two blue mirrors, in which I am perfectly denied” (23).

Refuge is to be found at night. God’s eye is equated to the glaring sun and Erdrich’s characters can be themselves “until the dawn, until the confounding light” (28). At night, the spiritual darkness of the forest seeps back in. Other spirits start appearing and with them, the forest itself. One such spirit is the Bidwell Ghost whose “house surged and burst in the dark trees” (34). The forest comes back as a force whose roots dislodge the circumference of the Catholic frame. The poem “The Kitchen Ghosts” opens with the line, “when my husband is sleeping, they step from the wall” (36). Without the blinding light of God, the kitchen gods appear, and they are described as “the willows on my teacups” (36). Again, the trees themselves are invading and they are “scratching their blood-red lacquers until the plaster shows white and wires appear” (35). The kitchen ghosts, the forest itself, is breaking through the parameter of her claustrophobia. In “Wild Plums,” Erdrich describes the “vines that carelessly pull down towers” (69). In “The Return,” Erdrich thinks back to the “scarred trees twisted” and how “the locked garage held all my secrets” (71). One winter, in her youth, she had “dug tunnels” so she could retreat into her own darkness: “in my den the air was warm and supernatural,” while “the crushing weight of church was up above” (71). She crawls deeper and deeper until “at last the world went dark” (71). “The Return” is one of the final poems in the collection and can be seen as the culmination of her desire to disappear, to be invisible, to fool God, and return to the darkness outside the Catholic frame. The word “den” also places the poems back into that symbolic order where human-animal transformations and unity are possible in the darkness.

Read this way, it is suddenly hard to imagine that Erdrich’s “sites of unification” are anything but the total rejection of the outer frame. Rather than unifying Ojibwe and Catholic mythologies in some kind of transnational syncretism, it seems that Erdrich tries to say that

unification can be attained *despite* Catholicism. It is true that the characters who are being blinded by God's light are not only Native Americans. Erdrich universalizes the problems of Catholicism, most overtly perhaps in the poem "Christ's Twin" where a dark shadowlike brother of Christ is pushed into the periphery of history, and "Potchikoo's Life After Death"—a trickster story where the trickster figure Potchikoo goes on a journey through the afterlife in a kind of rewriting of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The primary way that the transnational syncretic aspect is present is in the sense that God exists in the poems. Catholicism is not an intellectual frame—a fake ideology imposed from the outside; it is *real*. In all poems, the reader must assume that the Christian God, the sacraments, heaven and hell exist.

In this shorter chapter, I have been unable to do credit to the full range of meanings, interpretations, and symbols that are present in Erdrich's second poetry collection. It has been a crucial step in the development of this study's larger analysis, however, to reveal how Erdrich develops and expands her poetic mythology and moves from the *encounters* of *Jacklight* to the *consumptions*—resisting the outer frame from within—of *Baptism of Desire*. In the next chapter I will show how Erdrich's third poetry collection completes the cycle by moving to the *liberation* of her own poetic mythology. The cycle of *encounter*, *consumption*, and *liberation* will finally lead to the suggestion of an (eco)ethic that retrospectively informs everything that has been discussed so far and extends beyond Erdrich's own writing to literature at large.

Chapter 4: Liberation

Original Fire

The Beast and the Sovereign

Throughout Erdrich's poetry collections, the Other—the face behind the jacklight—turns out to be a masculine figure. Indeed, Erdrich has recreated the mythology as it exists in Manifest Destiny, the dominant narrative, and the following symbolic order can be delineated:

Masculine	Feminine
Human	Animal
Light	Dark
Civilization	Nature
Rational	Irrational
Thought	Emotion
Rigid	Fluid
Universal	Regional
White	Native ²⁵

As I have argued thus far, Erdrich's symbolic reversals do not switch the oppositions of the symbolic order themselves around. Like the artificial mythology described by Barthes, Erdrich recreates the same symbolic order but *revalues* them.

The symbolic order as described above resonates strongly with many late-twentieth century postmodern—and primarily poststructuralist—philosophies that have aimed to critique western ideologies.²⁶ For instance, Hélène Cixous' cultural essentialist feminism propagates the idea that female epistemologies have been repressed in male-dominated history. In her essay "Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous describes the classification of men as light and women as dark: "that dark which people have been trying to make [women] accept as their attribute" (876). Cixous famously proposes the concept of a feminine practice of writing which—much like Erdrich's poetic darkness—"can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which does not mean that it doesn't exist" (883).²⁷ In a way, it makes sense that anti-western ideologies share

²⁵ Naturally, the list is not exhaustive and can be extended.

²⁶ In fact, the very concept of a "symbolic order" comes from Jacques Lacan's poststructuralist psychoanalytical system of thought and is also used by Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Hélène Cixous, and many other thinkers.

²⁷ An interesting reversal of Wittgenstein's claim that "what can be said at all can be said clearly" discussed in chapter two.

characteristics with non-western ideologies, but the problem that results from this is that one can no longer determine what kind of writing Louise Erdrich belongs to. However, to remind the reader of this study's outset, it is actually of no concern whether Erdrich writes feminist poetry or Ojibwe poetry or postmodern poetry, because these explanations aim to explore the *origin* of her writing and thereby limit the *possibilities* of her writing. What matters is that Erdrich creates a poetic mythology that addresses issues in a way that is similar to but not necessarily legislated by postmodern theory. Theory thereby becomes a model for explanation, rather than a model for interpretation.

This is important to repeat as I move on to an exploration of the face behind the jacklight. The jacklight has already been analysed as a symbol for both the hunt and seduction. The hunter and the hunted are connected by being drawn to each other, the arrows directing both ways. Many of Erdrich's poems tackle this dynamic (e.g. the jacklight itself in "Jacklight," the man in the dodge in "A Love Medicine," the sheriff in "Indian Boarding School," John Wayne in "Dear John Wayne," the man who drank Vitalis in "Rugaroo," and God himself in *Baptism of Desire*). In *Jacklight's* "The Woods," the roles are reversed—like the *volta* in the final stanza of "Jacklight"—and the feminine character lures the man into the woods. In the spiritual space, she has fused with the forest: "now I wear the woods" (23). The forest has become like clothing, a bodily extension, a supplementation of her subjectivity. The speaker writes:

Now when I say *come*,
and you enter the woods,
hunting some creature like the woman I was,
I surround you. (23)

These lines reveal the same symbolic order: the man is the hunter and the woman is somehow creature-like. To hunt means to "surround," encapsulate, or in Cixous' words: to be "theorized, enclosed, coded" (883). The roles are reversed because the woman has become one with the woods. She is now the sovereign force who can command: "*come*" and is able to surround the man. Instances of *liberation* are strewn throughout Erdrich's poetry collections.

In his final lecture series, *The Beast and the Sovereign* (French: *La bête* [feminine] *et le souverain* [masculine]), Jacques Derrida explores this dynamic through the figures of the beast and the sovereign. He draws a line through the history of the West and deconstructs the definitions of these terms. Derrida's deconstructive approach is relevant because he looks in great detail at the self-expansive tendencies of the sovereign. He writes that the sovereign is

typified by being the one who has the power to define, to create categories, and most importantly: to state the *first category* from which all else is derived (92). Derrida writes that “the sovereign, in the broadest sense of the term, is he who has the right and the strength to be and be recognized as *himself, the same, properly the same as himself*” (66). Concretely, the sovereign is a homogenous space that expands itself. Everything within the boundaries of that space is seen as pure, clear, and self-same. Famously, Derrida calls this space the epoch of logocentrism. I read Erdrich’s “Jacklight” as a resistance to this epoch or myth. In Derrida’s terms, the jacklight that shines into the forest and divides the people into individuals can be seen as the sovereign who is expanding its self-sameness. That is, the Western definition of humanity as a humanist ego is the first category, and the sovereign has the strength to impose this category onto the Other. By violently forcing the “creature-like” people of the poems to become individuals, the sovereign is expanding its self-sameness.

This is why the choice for the Native American people is divided into either acculturation or extinction; there is no room for the Other, so either the Other *becomes* the Self (acculturation), or the Other is eradicated to make room for the Self (extinction). Derrida’s deconstruction also highlights, however, how both terms flow into each other (i.e. the sovereign is a beast and the beast is a sovereign). This “flowing into each other”—which Derrida calls the “metamorphic covering-over of the two figures” (18)—resonates with the ambiguous symbol of the jacklight, but also foreshadows the eventual disintegration of the mythology of Manifest Destiny. That is, the strict opposition of Self and Other, the Sovereign and the Beast, is itself a categorical opposition maintained by the sovereign—based on that first category, the ontological copula of Self and Other (where Self = good, and Other = bad). The characters in Erdrich’s dark space in the woods revel in their animality, femininity, and fluidity, but in that resistance also claim a kind of sovereignty against the colonial majority. In a way, Erdrich’s characters are impenetrable in their own space: the equipment of the Other “is useless in the tall brush” (“Jacklight” 4).

The Trickster and the Wiindigoo

In the quintessential novel in Native American literature by Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (1977), the medicine man, Betonie says: “we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs. We can because we invented white people” (122). The phrase “we invented white people” perfectly reflects the kind of counter-hegemonic mythologizing that I have been describing in Erdrich’s writing thus far. In post-colonial studies, the idea that the Other is an invention of the Self is well established (especially in Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*).

In this view—taken from Lacanian psychoanalysis—the Self, or the sovereign, *needs* the Other in order to maintain their identity. That is, the figure behind the jacklight—whom I take to represent the self-same sovereign force behind the myth of Manifest Destiny—has created a myth where the downfall of the Native American people is inscribed in the inevitable teleological course of history. This means that the justification for settler-colonial invasion, the justification for cultural genocide, is already inscribed in the very concept of “Indian.” This was visualized in John Gast’s painting that I discussed in the first chapter where the eradication of Native American people was aligned to the movement of the heavenly bodies (the rising sun), and thereby inevitable—a kind of mechanized fate (hence Manifest *Destiny*). Historian W. Richard Comstock points to this construction of the Other by saying that “in naming the native Americans as they did, the European invaders created as much as they discovered the phenomenon that was the ‘Indian.’” (61). The creation of a myth, therefore, is built on Derrida’s take on Austin’s concept of “performative speech acts” where the word “Indian” does not *refer* to a concept but *creates* a concept. Derrida adds the notion of “citation” to the performative speech act which means that every word carries within it all “previous uses of the term it now employs” (Leitch 2537). In the case of the word “Indian” the previous uses have a very well-known history of colonizers realizing much later that they had arrived on another continent and that Indians are indeed not Indians. More importantly, the word clearly reveals how the conception of Native American people in the minds of European settlers is something inscribed on the inside of their own horizon—their mythology. The phrase “we invented white people” turns this around. From the indigenous perspective, the settlers are the Other, and like the settlers, the indigenous people had their own way of appropriating the invasion within the parameters of their own mythology.

I claim that Erdrich appropriates the figure behind the jacklight by casting him in the role of the Wiindigoo—a flesh-eating spirit or monster who often appears in Ojibwe and Cree mythology, especially in Trickster stories. This way, the romanticized idea that Native Americans in pre-Columbian times lived in a kind of blissful Eden—another narrative established by the West—and that nothing could prepare them for the completely alien experience of a white man stepping onto their land is bypassed. Naturally, Ojibwe people also dealt with war, harsh winters, and starvation before the Europeans arrived and they told stories about these problems that were personified by characters, such as the Wiindigoo. Thus, by describing the figure behind the jacklight as a Wiindigoo, Erdrich manages to resist the Eurocentric viewpoint where Native Americans can only be understood in light of the West; maintains the mythology of the Ojibwe; and re-centres the world from the perspective of her

Ojibwe characters. It is important to point out, again, that this is part of Erdrich's *poetic* mythology, something that she creates, rather than something that passively comes to her from her Ojibwe heritage.²⁸ This way, Erdrich creates a reality where external figures are not shrouded in complete incomprehensibility, but a place where the settlers are interpreted from a perspective that predates them. Indeed, as Silko wrote in *Ceremony*, Erdrich's characters can deal with the white man, because they have created him—in the form of the Wiindigoo.

Up to now, I have written primarily about the light of the West in contrast to the dark poetic space of the Turtle Mountain forest in Erdrich's writing. The title of this study could have referred to this light/dark dynamic but connecting the figure behind the jacklight to the Wiindigoo opens up another symbol of myths and counter-myths: *eating and being eaten*. In her poem "Windigo," Erdrich writes that the Wiindigoo "is a flesh-eating, wintry demon with a man buried deep inside of it" (*Jacklight* 79). In another version, as described in Erdrich's novel *The Round House*, the Wiindigoo is a person who has taken to eating human flesh due to starvation. This monster could then "cast its spirit inside of a person" (*The Round House* 227). Another traditional story called "Wesakaychak, the Windigo, and the Ermine" was preserved on the "Oohosis-Desjarlais tape" in 1972, and subsequently anthologized by Richard Erdoes and Alfonzo Ortiz in *American Indian Trickster Tales*. This story has all the common elements of the Wiindigoo character and its counterpart, the Trickster—who, in this story, goes by the name of Wesakaychak, but is sometimes also called Nanapush, Potchikoo. The story begins: "Wesakaychak was wandering through the forest one day when he suddenly found himself face-to-face with the Windigo" (200). Quickly, Wesakaychak convinces an ermine to jump into the mouth of the Windigo and to kill him from the inside. The ermine succeeds and the Wiindigoo is defeated. In other versions of the story, it is the Trickster him/herself who jumps into the mouth of the Wiindigoo to kill it from within. The core dynamic of the Trickster and the Wiindigoo is that the Wiindigoo either hunts the Trickster or tricks the Trickster into being eaten, and the Trickster subsequently manages—through some trickery of his or her own—to break free again from within.

Indeed, it is striking how many of Erdrich's poems have a similar plot development and the parallel between the face-to-face encounter of the Trickster and the Wiindigoo, on the one

²⁸ It is also important to point out that it is still possible that Erdrich's Ojibwe heritage has been incremental in the development of her poetic mythology, but this study's aim is not to come to a better understanding of Ojibwe culture, but to come to a better understanding of Erdrich's writing. Again, the shift in direction from *origin* to *destination* is the difference between an anthropological study and literary criticism.

hand, and the confrontation of two opposing myths “at the edge of the woods,” on the other, starts gaining traction. Firstly, the idea of the hunt automatically evokes a sense of a carnivorous desire, the desire to eat the other. Thus, another dimension is added to the symbol of the jacklight. It symbolizes consumption. To be seen by the light, means to be eaten. Moreover, the important aspect of “trickery” in Wiindigoo stories reflects the trickster-element of the jacklight itself, luring its prey into a trap. I already shortly suggested this reading in the previous chapters. I have shown how the light represents a desire for possession. The figure behind the jacklight wants to possess the feminine figure and surround her. A strong example of this is the first scene in Erdrich’s novel *Love Medicine*, when June Kashpaw meets a man in a Rigger Bar whom she sleeps with in his truck. As he moves onto her, “she felt it open at her shoulder like a pair of jaws, blasting heat, and had the momentary and voluptuous sensation that she was lying stretched out before a great wide mouth” (5). The man and the car become the closing mouth of the Wiindigoo, consuming her. Here, too, the scene plays both on the idea of violence and seduction. Being objectified, sexually and physically—in Erdrich’s universe—is to be surrounded, circumscribed, and externally defined. Afterwards, the man falls asleep and June tries to get out of the car: “June had wedged herself so tight against the door that when she sprang the latch she fell out. Into the cold. It was a shock like being born” (6). Like Wesakaychak, June breaks her circumference and falls out of the body of the Wiindigoo.

In Erdrich’s third novel, *The Beet Queen*—a novel that, similar to *Baptism of Desire*, has often been neglected because its main characters are mostly non-native—one of the main characters, a mixed-blood woman called Celestine James, begins an affair with a man named Karl Adare. As their relationship progresses, he starts working his way into her home. Like lovers who meet in the Cloud of Unknowing, their relationship began in a place where “we were hidden,” but this place has been taken over by “the shocking glare” (132). At one point she notices that “he is looking at me with his eyes in a different way, as if he cannot figure the sum of me” (132). He used to have the eyes of a lover, but now they have become piercing jacklights that try to figure her out, but he does not succeed. He looks at her “as if I am too much for him to comprehend” (132). It is crucial to see how this relates back both to regionalism and issues of gender. Fetterley and Pryse argue that the “region” and “women” are similarly located by the dominant discourse (that is, on the margins), and the idea of intrusion into one’s private sphere, be it a body, a home, a region, reduces Celestine into an “object of scrutiny” (36; 241).

Thus, we can extend Erdrich’s poetic mythology by adding the Wiindigoo and the Trickster to the symbolic order described above. The sexual/violent encounter between a man

and a woman (e.g., in “A Love Medicine,” “The Woods,” “The Strange People” and in scenes from novels such as *Love Medicine* and *The Round House*, and *The Beet Queen*) is symbolically aligned to the encounter between the myth of settler-colonialism and of the Ojibwe (e.g. “Jacklight,” “Captivity,” and *The Plague of Doves*), but also to the encounter between the Trickster and the Wiindigoo (e.g. the story of Akii in *The Round House* and the poem “Windigo”). Rather than saying that *one symbolizes the other*, however, I claim that all stories and poems must be understood as manifestations of Erdrich’s deeper lying poetic mythology. This is important because there is no real indication in Erdrich’s writing that signals that one allegorical meaning is preferred over the other. That is, the rape that lies at the core of the plot of *The Round House* seems to be first and foremost about the psychological consequences of sexual violence itself and it should therefore not be read primarily as an anticolonial or feminist critique. Similarly, “Jacklight” could be read as an anti-colonial poem (where the figures behind the jacklight are settlers and the figures in the forest are Native Americans) but also as an ecocritical poem (where the figures behind the jacklight are hunters and the figures in the forest are animals of prey).

There is no indication, and no reason, to reduce any poem or story to either of these readings. This is why I prefer to consider the different readings not as vertically ordered allegorical meanings, but as horizontal *manifestations* of Erdrich’s poetic mythology. The Ojibwe myth of the Trickster and the Wiindigoo is therefore also another manifestation and what I take from that myth is not the story itself but its skeletal dynamic. That is, its *form*. This coincides with Barthes’ idea that a myth is a *form* not a *content*. When Geraldine is sexually assaulted by a white man in *The Round House*, the focus is on those exterior elements: the psychological consequences of rape itself, and not on any possible interior signification where the attack *actually* signifies colonialism. What lies behind these exterior elements is the form, the dynamic of dominance, the confrontation between Self and Other.

Dean Rader also argues that Erdrich’s symbolism is not an either/or situation, but rather that the images are conflated and that thereby the different readings are concurrently present (104). The density is created through a matrix of connotations or associations. That is, every manifestation carries the trace of the other readings in them without concealing them (as conventional metaphors and allegories do, where one meaning *stands for* the other). This part of the analysis is especially assisted by Barthes’ idea of the text-as-subject. Erdrich’s horizontal network of symbols demands a kind of surface reading in which the context is maintained. In every manifestation—e.g. the sexual encounter between the rig driver and June Kashpaw in *Love Medicine*; the vines growing into the foundation of Joe’s house in *The Round House*; the

trapper who tears the tip off of Mooshum's ear with his teeth in *The Plague of Doves*—the event itself has centrality, but it carries the other readings within them as traces. This way, the spirit of the Wiindigoo is always present without taking centre stage—a characteristic of the Wiindigoo that actually goes a long way into the very linguistic structure of the Ojibwe language.

The Ojibwe language—and in fact many Native American languages—are verb-oriented rather than noun-oriented (as the English language is). In English, the word “spirit” has two meanings. The Oxford dictionary defines spirit as “the non-physical part of a person” or “a supernatural being,” but it can also mean: “a person's mood or attitude.” The latter definition is more verb-like as it refers to an embodied action rather than an entity, and the idea of the Trickster spirit or the Wiindigoo spirit in Ojibwe leans much more on the latter definition than the English word “ghost” does, for instance. This means that *resembling* or *acting like* a Wiindigoo is not that different from *being* a Wiindigoo. So when Linden Lark rapes Geraldine in *The Round House*, the Wiindigoo spirit is embodied through the action, the rape itself (verb), rather than through the person (noun).

I claim that Erdrich, whose first language is not Ojibwe, but who has an extensive formal understanding of the language and has commented on the verb- or action-oriented nature of the Ojibwe language (“Read North Dakota Presents; A Conversation with Louise Erdrich (2012)”), has implemented this shift in her poetic mythology. I understand her horizontal symbolism in this way. It is a subtle but monumental difference to view culture as something that is actively created or suggested or something that is passively performed.

Thus, Erdrich's poetic mythology is not a set of symbols, but a skeletal form, a dynamic that recurs and is deepened with every manifestation that subsequently evokes the other manifestations. This is why—over the course of this study—I have returned time and again to the figure of the jacklight, because it is contained in all other manifestations. The central importance of *embodiment* and even *performance* (in light of Ojibwe as a verb-oriented language) on the concept of manifestations also evokes the idea of an *incarnation*. All the examples above can also be understood as incarnations of this mythological dynamic, ranging all the way from words: “dark/light” to characters: “Linden Lark/Geraldine Coutts.” By skeletal form, therefore, I mean a certain empty structure (empty in the sense of being without content). The slash symbol that separates light from dark represents that structure. The slash has slots on both sides that can be filled by all the manifestations, embodiments, incarnations I have discussed thus far. My interest now, goes out to that structure itself; the overarching—or underlying—signification of the poetic mythology. That is, there must be some kind of

aesthetic or ethical underpinning that informs the poetic mythology and groups the different stories and incarnations together—something which could be said is an Erdrichean poetics.

Original Fire

Erdrich provides many hints to what the underlying poetics of her mythology might be throughout her work but nowhere as pungent as in her third poetry collection *Original Fire* (2003). Of course, most of this study has already been devoted to how the symbolic reversals in Erdrich's poetic mythology question the "morality" of the dominant discourse by claiming and revaluing the feminine "dark continent," that is normally debased in the myth of Manifest Destiny. But I wish to go even a step further and take the *form* of Erdrich's mythology to a meta-level. In a way, the Barthesian "archaeological restoration" of the symbolic order of Manifest Destiny is Erdrich's way of deliberately jumping into the mouth of the Wiindigoo, circumscribing herself—like her characters—with the laws and dominance of the sovereign. At first it struck me as weird that Erdrich seems to adhere to the laws of light and dark, human and animal, masculine and feminine. Why would Erdrich comply with the mythology that locates American Indians on the dark and strange periphery of existence? As I have tried to show, however, Erdrich—like the Trickster—builds her own poetic mythology from *inside* the belly of the sovereign and overthrows it from within. This way her three poetry collections can be read as the three steps of her own poetic mythology: *encounter*, *consumption*, and *liberation*.

The liberation from the sovereign is achieved once the poetic mythology becomes self-sustaining—when an alternative mythology or *form* is established. Erdrich provides these myths continually, but most clearly in *Original Fire*, when she turns her poetic mythology into a personal ecopoetics and even the glimpse of an ethical system. In short, most poems in *Original Fire* consist of selected poems taken from *Jacklight* and *Baptism of Desire*, followed by sixteen new poems. This way, this third poetry collection covers the breadth of most of what has been discussed in this study. Having analysed the poems from the two earlier collections in the previous chapters, my main concern here are the new poems. The reader is taken from the first poem "The Fence" where the Erdrichean speaker is pregnant, to "Ninth Month," "Birth," and "New Mother." The poems that follow are mostly about the speaker's experiences as a new mother and her experiences of growing older as a woman, culminating in the recognition of the original fire in the eyes of her new-born child until she sees it in the world around her at large.

In "New Mother," Erdrich writes:

Sometimes in the frenzy of first events
 there comes to me a strange
 declamatory awareness
 as though my consciousness has stirred
 from the heap of broken toys
 and new toys
 that is my baby's existence.
 When I look into her eyes I see below
 the surface of things
 into the water of the other surface
 through the layers of that surface
 to the original fire. (133)

This stanza illustrates an empathic face-to-face connection between Erdrich and her daughter. She looks at her child, but does not project her gaze onto her daughter, searching her out. Instead, the experience comes to her in a "strange declamatory awareness." She looks at her child obliquely, via the "the heap of broken toys." Through all conceptual layers, Erdrich sees her daughter's original fire. With regard to the encounter of difference, Jacques Derrida also stated that one has to tread prudently and that the Other only "lets itself be glimpsed" (*Of Grammatology* 14). More strongly resonating with Erdrich's concept of original fire, however, is the ethics of phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas whose concept of "the face of the Other" has the same epiphanous effect as Erdrich's "declamatory awareness." For Levinas, who states that ethics is the first philosophy, the recognition of somebody else's subjectivity is the "ultimate event" of being (*Totality and Infinity* 221). The fact that Levinas prioritizes the social relation of the Self and the Other as the foundation of his metaphysical system parallels Erdrich's choice of the word "original" but also how she packaged the phrases in her poetry collection from twenty years earlier, *Jacklight*. I discussed this briefly in the final section of chapter two where original fire was referred to as "the light of our bones" (*Jacklight* 24). In "Train," Erdrich had called "love" that "bleak radiance" and said that this is "the light I was born with" (*Jacklight* 25). In opposition to the glaring jacklight, the original fire is something that precedes it both temporally and ontologically—a dimmer light that lies within. In "The Levelers," too, "the light of our bones" and the "green fragile glow" is introduced by the phrase "Again I see us walking"—signalling a *return* to something prior, more fundamental. Even the

word “bones” refers to the body’s core. The idea of *returning* was also strong in *Baptism of Desire*, in poems such as “The Visit,” “Saint Clare,” and “The Return.”

In “Grief,” a poem that follows “New Mother,” Erdrich turns the empathic gaze from her daughter onto herself:

Sometimes you have to take your own hand
as though you were a lost child
and bring yourself stumbling
home over twisted ice. (146)

In this poem, Erdrich comes face-to-face with herself as an Other and in that displaced moment recognizes the original fire in her own eyes. Unlike the consuming gaze of the sovereign—the Wiindigoo—Erdrich does not extend self-sameness even onto herself. She estranges herself by treating herself “as though [she] were a lost child.”

Erdrich’s daughter returns in “Morning Fire” where the opposition between the empathic relation of the original fire and the all-consuming gaze of the jacklight is cut clearer than in any of her poems. Erdrich looks at her daughter “and then she smiles / and such light pours over me” (151). As her daughter smiles at her, the light pours over Erdrich like the jacklight that searched her out and divided her, but this light is different:

It is not that white blaze
that strikes the earth all around you
when you learn of the death
of one you love. Or the next light
that strips away your skin.
Not the radiance
that unwraps you to the bone. (151)

Indeed, this “white blaze” evokes the fields that are cast white by the one-directional gaze of John Wayne on the cinema screen from “Dear John Wayne”; the omniscient sun-like gaze of God who blazes all secrecy away in *Baptism of Desire*; the blinding light of the bug traps that pulls the insects to their death in “A Love Medicine”; the jacklight of the hunter who catches and surrounds you in “Jacklight.” Instead, Erdrich writes, this light that pours over her is a “soft and original fire” (151). Erdrich has created the possibility of that original fire within the

symbolic structure of the West—a microcosm that is the space of darkness. The original fire is like a fluorescence that needs a certain degree of darkness in order to be seen. But what is even more important in this poem is how Erdrich figures the white blaze as something devouring, something that “strips away your skin” and “unwraps you to the bone.”

Again, the glaring light is connected to the flesh-eating Wiindigoo figure that operates on the logic of dominance. Levinas uses the word “tyrant” to refer to the same figure as Derrida’s “sovereign” and in his essay “Freedom and Command,” Levinas writes that the tyrant “has no one in front of him” and that therefore the tyrant “has always been alone” (17). When the tyrant Wiindigoo looks at Erdrich’s daughter, its own (jack)light is so strong that it does not see the original fire of the child; it sees only objects and concepts that exist within its own mind—not the subject, the person, beyond. The Wiindigoo is therefore always alone, surrounded by the self-sameness in the concepts it has devised that constitute its myth. It eats the Other in order to make it part of itself. The denuding, and devouring effect of the Wiindigoo’s gaze comes back again to the image of light as something that searches out, frisks, strips the Other bare until everything is divided, categorized and understood. The Wiindigoo does not tolerate secrets, mysticism, and alterity. In other words, the Wiindigoo denies resistance, the agency of the Other, and thereby the very existence of the Other *as* a subject. Erdrich proposes to turn off one’s own objectifying jacklight, the desire to consume the Other, and allows herself to be eaten; she allows her daughter to shine her light, her original fire, on her—and thereby levelling the dynamic of dominance in favour of *reciprocity*.

It now makes sense that the primary image of John Wayne—as the camera zooms in on his face—is “a horizon of teeth” that grins, like a devouring monster, at the “land that was once flesh” (*Jacklight* 12). John Wayne is a non-communicative face whose light only shines one way—into the audience and the white fields. Similarly, the all-consuming flood caused by a dam in “I Was Sleeping Where the Black Oaks Move” ravages the forest above the reservation: “a whole forest pulled through the teeth of the spillway” (67). The spillway acts as a mouth that—like the jacklight—divides the *whole* forest into individual trees: “trees surfacing singly” their “branches whitening in the raw sun” (67). Like the light “that strips away your skin,” the man-made flood “drag[s] off the covering” of the forest, leaving the “roots washed to bones” (67).

The dynamic of dominance—described in this study—creates a horizontal network of manifestations that constitute Erdrich’s poetic mythology. Not one image has precedence over the other. The figure of the jacklight, a manifestation of the logic of dominance, is a one-directional projection. There is no communication for the figure behind the jacklight, only a

rigidifying gaze that encapsulates the Other like a closing mouth. Communication, according to Levinas is the basic relation of reality and assumes absolute difference. He writes: “Speech proceeds from absolute difference” (194). Absolute difference is the discontinuity of *being*. It cuts one reality into several. A sovereign who thinks of himself as the ontological centre of reality does not engage with the Other—he talks but does not listen. This can be brought back to Barthes’ conception of mythologies of which he stated that the construction of a myth is the essentializing of contingency. It is to claim universalism in one’s own particular situation—i.e. a claim to sovereignty. It is to construct an interpretation of one’s own horizon and state: “this is what the entire world is like.” As has been discussed at length above, for the myth of Manifest Destiny, this is the idea that the right to *claim* the land is somehow inscribed *in* the land. Regarding the construction of such a myth, Barthes wrote that “all the experiences of confrontation are reverberating, any otherness is reduced to sameness” (*Mythologies* 152).

For Erdrich, the recognition of otherness—that is, the recognition of the Other’s original fire—is a pressing matter. In the final poem of *Original Fire*, “Asiniig,” she writes about communication with stones, and, in extension, the world as a whole and humanity’s place in it. She opens her poem with the words: “*The Ojibwe word for stone, asin, is animate. Stones are alive ... The universe began with a conversation between stones*” (153). Having taken the concept of original fire from her daughter, to herself, and to other people, Erdrich now takes the concept of original fire to its extreme in this final poem by defining it as *beingness* or *life* itself. Like Levinas, Erdrich places the incentive of beingness on the relation, the intersection, the communication of absolute difference. The world did not begin with *one* stone, but began *between* stones—and, more importantly, it is to be sought there again. She is referring to a sublime sensation of otherness in the natural world that confronts the observer both with the finiteness of his or her own part in the larger consciousness of existence—and in that awareness, she sees her own infinity as part of that existence.

The speaker of the poem is the world itself. The world states that “we allowed you to occur” (153). Humans came from the earth, but the earth is “still deciding whether that was wise” (153). In the mind of the West, stones and humans are ontologically separated; they are closed off of each other. Stones are mere objects, but in this poem, the stones also make a claim to subjectivity. They say:

When we break ourselves open—
that is when the healing starts.
When you break yourselves open—

that is how the healing continues. (155)

The stones and the humans have to break themselves open, break through the demarcation of objectivity—break out of the stomach of the Wiindigoo. To recognize the Other’s subjectivity is to recognize openness. To treat the earth as a tool is to deny that openness. The mechanised cultivation of the earth thereby becomes another devouring force. This poem—Erdrich’s most normative and pedagogical—is a lesson in how to stop consuming the world as an object, and to live with it as a subject, because this is “how the healing starts” (155). On the first level, this poem illustrates an ecopoetics that critiques the Manifest Destiny mentality. But it is easy to misinterpret this dimension of Erdrich’s mythology. Reading her as a “green Indian” who laments what the “white man” did to her country, does not do justice to the full extent of her writing. In reality, Erdrich takes cues from a face-to-face metaphysical ethics—which in Levinas’ philosophy is limited only to human beings—and extends it not only to animals, but the world as a whole. Again, Erdrich surprises the reader because she does not take the usual route of arguing that humans, animals, plants and stones are all part of one cosmic unity; she maintains acute alterity in the face of the Other. For her, the argument that everyone and everything is *one*, is too similar to the self-same Wiindigoo spirit who tries to eliminate otherness. It is only through empathy as a recognition of alterity that the original fire of the Other becomes visible. This means that integration with the Other is only possible through the recognition of alterity—by putting out your own jacklight and to see the original fire in the Other’s eyes and allow yourself to be seen, too.

Thus, Erdrich has created a new (artificial) myth within the belly of the dominant myth. Beginning with *Jacklight*, she reconstructed the logic of dominance and the symbolic order of Manifest Destiny—jumping in the mouth of the Wiindigoo. She took that symbolic order to its extreme in *Baptism of Desire*, by being surrounded by the Catholic frame and the omniscient eye of God, ostensibly embracing Catholic concepts, but always pushing against its parameter with her symbolic reversals—deconstructing the monster from within. Finally, in *Original Fire*, she provided a metaphysical ethics that not only countered but overhauled the symbolic order she had reconstructed—jumping out of the open chest of the Wiindigoo again.

Conclusion

This study's analysis consisted of three main steps, which I will summarise here to make it as visible as possible what I have tried to argue in this thesis. Each step was necessary in order to get to the next and therefore many alignments were pulled apart into the linear progression of a written text and I wish to reunite them below. Firstly, the vantage point of this study was the region—the reservation in North Dakota. This region was typified by a forest plateau and in *Jacklight* Erdrich drew attention to the border of that plateau: *the edge of the woods*. Here, I took the first step by looking at the *encounters* that took place on this borderline between the dominant force of the settlers on the one hand and the Ojibwe people of the Turtle Mountains on the other. More broadly, it could be an encounter between contesting mythologies; between a man and a woman; between the Wiindigoo and the Trickster. I explained the desire of the dominant force to *consume* the other. It was the desire of the man in the white dodge to consume Theresa; it was the desire of Linden Lark to consume Geraldine Coutts and her family; it was the desire of the Wiindigoo to consume the Trickster. The verb “to consume” appeared to function similarly to the verbs, “to possess,” “to invade,” “to encapsulate,” “to dominate,” “to hunt.”

Next, I turned to Erdrich's second book of poems, *Baptism of Desire*, to look at the issue of *consumption*. That is, what happens in Erdrich's writing when one culture is consumed by another; when a region is consumed by the state; a woman consumed by a man? It turned out that *Baptism of Desire* was filled with little tricks, and, indeed, like the Trickster who starts to cut her way through the belly of the Wiindigoo, Erdrich's speaker worked her way out of outside encapsulation. In terms of form, Erdrich's symbolic reversals became like tiny unstitchings of the fabric of the dominant discourse. Every time Erdrich claimed animality, darkness, femininity, or spirituality for herself or her characters, she cut a tiny whole in the circumference that surrounded her. I drew a line between the Trickster who is trapped in the stomach of the Wiindigoo and the American Indian who is trapped in mythology of the West.

The final step of this thesis was to move from *encounter* and *consumption* to *liberation*—the moment the Trickster breaks free from the stomach of the Wiindigoo. Throughout Erdrich's writing, there were many instances when her characters turned things around for themselves. In the final chapter, however, I focussed primarily on how Erdrich moved away from *critiquing* the West—which is a *negative* endeavour—and started *creating* an alternative model—which is a *positive* endeavour. Her poetic mythology became more than a criticism of the West and could lead to a new ethical attitude that moved beyond the conflict between oppositions. In

other words, the very struggle between the Self and the Other was overcome by arguing for a renewed attention for the Original Fire. The Original Fire, for Erdrich was the primordial understanding of intersubjectivity, a connection between entities (e.g. parents, children, stones, animals) that is drowned out by the harsh and blinding light of Western mythologies—the jacklight. Indeed, the very logic of Manifest Destiny is seated on the idea that alterity has to be eradicated. Settler-colonialism adheres to a logic of dominance and attempts to consume the land. For Erdrich, it is this logic that has also led to inconsiderate appropriation of ecological systems in modern times. Hence, Erdrich’s anthropological ethics is also an ecological ethics—or an ecopoetics. In other words, Erdrich’s concept of Original Fire signals the liberation of the Trickster from the stomach of the Wiindigoo in the sense that her ethics *overcomes* the logic of dominance.

As has become clear, the three steps are themselves also the steps that constitute the poetic mythology of Louise Erdrich itself. Throughout Erdrich’s work, the sequence of *encounter*, *consumption*, and *liberation* operate on all different levels. Sometimes it occurs in a poem, e.g. “Jacklight.” Sometimes it manifests itself in a single character, e.g. Geraldine Coutts in *The Round House*. Sometimes it spans across books, e.g. her three poetry collections. Following Barthes, I have pointed to the importance of the *form* of this mythology, rather than the *content*. That is, all of the examples above are *manifestations* or *incarnations* of the same form. This means two things. Firstly, it means that every manifestation carries the trace of all others within itself. So when Geraldine Coutts steps out of her bedroom—for the first time since she was raped by Linden Lark—she carries the traces of Theresa and the teenagers in the outdoor cinema within herself. These *traces* are radically different from *symbols*. Geraldine does not *symbolize* Theresa in the sense that one stands for the other, nor do they *symbolize* the Trickster, for instance. Rather, they manifest themselves in the same “slot” of the poetic mythology. They become like incarnations of Erdrichean archetypes that *evoke each other*—rather than, and now we have come full circle, *consuming each other*.

This leads to the second reason for the emphasis on form and that is on the side of interpretation. Sure, Geraldine could symbolize a feminist critique, or a post-colonial critique, but these are also *traces* that appear alongside each manifestation. This is what I meant by Erdrich’s tribal trajectory. Her poetic mythology is a matter of *elaboration* and each book deepens and expands this mythology, because—of course—suddenly Geraldine in *The Round House* (2012) is also evoked when the reader turns back to June Kashpaw in *Love Medicine* (1984). Viewed in this way—and it has become apparent that I take this view from Erdrich herself—the characters *demand a presence*. That is, because Geraldine’s rape does not *stand*

for colonial intrusion, the reader is pulled to the event itself; the traumatic event has precedence over the traces that it evokes. Indeed, the whole theoretical approach that I have taken for this study anticipated—and was formed by—Erdrich’s poetic mythology itself. The discussion in the first chapter about treating the text as something that can generate meaning is a recognition of the text’s Original Fire; the “shift in direction” from origin to destination mirrors the demand to treat the manifestations for their own sake. Coming back this study’s research question, it appears that agency is not only generated between characters but also between characters and the readers, i.e., the text itself regains agency.

What this really means is that Erdrich’s poetic mythology demands a certain hermeneutical approach. Her characters demand to be treated with integrity and *for the sake of themselves*. In the first chapter, I have argued for preserving “the integrity of the text” and treating the “text-as-subject” on the basis of theories by Barthes, Treuer, and certain phenomenological theories, but it now becomes possible to see Erdrich herself as demanding such a faithful reading, and this demand is embedded in the very structure of her poetic mythology. Indeed, in the paradigm of the hermeneutics of suspicion, it is common to treat texts as *symptoms* that stand for something concealed, but Geraldine is not a symptom. Erdrich resists this kind of meaning by demanding a presence for herself and her characters through the concept of Original Fire. She demands her readers not to project monological theories onto her work, but to enter into a dialogue. Thus, there is also an *encounter*—at the edge of the woods—between me as a literary scholar on the one hand and Erdrich’s writing on the other. How could I make Erdrich’s hermeneutical demand explicit without already infusing it in the methodology? This is what Martin Heidegger calls the “hermeneutical circle”—the moment I have come to the end, I am back at the beginning.

The fact that Erdrich’s hermeneutical demand goes beyond the theoretical assemblage delineated in the first chapter means both that a literary text can generate meaning that goes beyond what any single theory can explain, and—concretely—that Erdrich’s poetic mythology can itself inform how we relate ourselves to other texts. First and foremost, Erdrich’s poetic mythology can shed light on the work of other Ojibwe and Cree writers such as Gerald Vizenor and Tomson Highway. In Highway’s novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, for instance, the two main characters—the brothers Okimasis—talk about how “Weesageechak chewed the Weetigo’s entrails to smithereens from the inside out” (120). In Cree, the trickster is known as Weesageechak and the Wiindigoo is called the Weetigo (Erdoes and Ortiz 195-200). As the brothers step out of the mall where they had lunch, the building “loomed behind them, the rear end of a beast that, having gorged itself, expels its detritus” (121). The metaphor of the mall as

resembling the Weetigo that has eaten the boys seems a direct extension of Erdrich's poetic mythology. They entered the mall as Cree boys, but, seduced by American junk food and commercial products, leave the building as (white) Americans. The imagery of eating and being eaten is clear, but the resemblances can be taken further. The boys deal with loss of identity throughout the novel and in taking Erdrich's poetic mythology as a theoretical basis, it becomes possible to interpret their struggles as having to deal with being consumed by an outside culture and thereby losing their own.

But, indeed, the imagery of a settler-colonial force that slowly eats away the land and the identities of the people who live on it recurs across writers from different American Indian cultures. Writers such as Natalie Diaz (Mojave) and Laura Da' (Eastern Shawnee) employ images of devouring machines and mouth-wracked faces—creating similar symbolic structures as employed by Erdrich. Erdrich's poetic mythology thereby allows these texts to enter into a dialogue and get a broader understanding of how mythological dynamics are being appropriated to deal with cultural loss and rejuvenation in American Indian literature and poetry. But the reach of Erdrich's poetic mythology does not limit itself to American Indian writers. Erdrich's poetic mythology has a two-fold purpose. In addition to the exploration of the mythological form in other American Indian writers, Erdrich's mythology also allows for an approach to literature at large that can mediate between strictly formalist readings on the one hand and cultural readings on the other, because the reader/critic is asked to look for the text's original fire—its own way of generating meaning. This mediation can play an important role in the current debate in literary studies between the hermeneutics of suspicion on the one hand and the hermeneutics of faith on the other. Erdrich's poetic mythology and her idea of the original fire can be able to liberate texts from what Felski calls their “all-determining contextual frames” (“Context Stinks” 590)—to break texts free from the belly of the all-consuming Wiindigoo and to allow them to speak for themselves.

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