

**Reclaiming the Land:
Space and Ethnic Identity in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks***

by

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In her novel *Tracks* (1988), Louise Erdrich, influenced by postmodern and ethnic literature, creates a narrative that centers around the Native American experience during the early 20th century. By offering the backstories of several characters, she offers insight into the cultural and personal consequences of colonization and assimilation. Erdrich focuses on the cultural impact that the exploitation of Native American landscape had on indigenous communities, along with the overall struggle to preserve their heritage in a world seeking to erase it. Throughout the novel, space—both physical and spiritual—becomes a medium through which Erdrich further explores the ongoing tension between Native traditions and Western influence, as this essay will attempt to show.

Early in the novel, Fleur's connection to her ancestral home highlights the deep significance of the land to Native American identity. After Nanapush rescues her, Fleur chooses to return to her family's cabin, despite his warning that "[t]he land will go," and that it "will be sold and measured" (8). Space here represents Fleur's ties to her ancestors, her last link to her past and cultural heritage. Her refusal to abandon it reflects an effort to preserve her identity, even as others in the community appear to accept assimilation into Western norms. This is directly tied to the historical context. As Nancy J. Peterson explains, U.S. policies during and after the reservation era, particularly the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887, were designed to fragment tribal landholdings and promote individual ownership in line with capitalist ideals (986). The act restricted communal ownership and encouraged Native Americans to adopt Euro-American landholding practices. Peterson notes that the goal was to assimilate Native peoples by making them "productive capitalists" capable of paying taxes and managing private property (986). However, this shift caused widespread disruption in tribal life. Erdrich illustrates this through Nanapush's protest against the lumbering of the Pillager land. When he confronts the Agent, he is told that a lumber company has made a good offer and that "the government is obliged to take an offer of that sort when the taxes are unpaid" (207). This exchange underscores how Native land was systematically lost through tax burdens, deceptive deals, or loan defaults, emphasizing the exploitation Native Americans endured under these policies (Peterson 987).

In addition, lake Matchimanito, where the Pillager cabin sits, functions as a symbol of purity and spirituality. The lake, rumored to be inhabited by the monster Misshepeshe, is both feared and respected by the members of the Anishinaabe community. This symbolic connection to the land becomes even more complex when we consider Fleur's spiritual connection to the lake and its monster, a topic widely discussed among the community, as the people believe that Fleur can summon the lake monster in order to harm those who pose a threat to her livelihood. Nanapush mentions that there are plenty of stories about the ways Fleur has managed to keep officials away from her the land. Matchimanito is located on the Western side of the reservation, and, according to Anishinaabe tradition, this is where the land of the dead is, which is why people of their culture face west when they die. Again, Fleur's attachment to Native beliefs comes in great contrast to the endorsement of Western values by the rest of the community. Anna-Grace Scullion stresses the importance of Fleur's relationship with the spirit world at Matchimanito, stating that it allows her a unique type of freedom beyond the limits of land and space set by colonial ideas. Unlike the fixed and controlling nature of land allotment, her bond with the lake represents the powerful, ever-changing force of the natural world, a belief deeply rooted in Anishinaabe tradition. The colonial understanding of landscape is based upon views that enable changes and adjustments to land ownership, Scullion adds, essentially resulting in the literal and metaphorical removal of Native Americans "not only from their ancestral lands, but also and thereby from their traditional senses of place within 'the earth and sky'." It appears that Western views on land and ownership do not align with Indigenous tradition, making the allotment of land a cruel practice that brings the settlers' indifference towards Native tribes and their culture to the foreground.

The tension between Indigenous and Western ideas, which is gradually built up in the novel, reaches its climax with the final destruction of the forest. When the lumber company workers arrive, they are met with resistance, as if Fleur and Nature merge into one force, refusing to yield to the will of the white man. After the first few trees begin to collapse, it is now evident that Nature is in control, perhaps in some way reacting to the colonizers' hubristic treatment of its gifts. Space is used one final time to underline the important role of nature in Native American culture. For the Anishinaabe, nature considered sacred, as it is connected with notions of the after-life, and sincerely admired. For the settlers, however, it is just another piece of land they can profit from. Jill Jepson seems to agree with this view, highlighting that the main conflict lies in the different approaches to land use (32). Since the tribe survives on the natural resources provided by the land, it is in their best interest to preserve it, while the white

corporations aim to destroy it (Jepson 32). What becomes evident in this confrontation is how closely *Tracks* relates nature to ethnic identity, whether indigenous or Western. As Jepson puts it, “homing energies emerge in natural landscapes and in characters’ intimacy with the land, while displacement is reflected in indifference toward and destruction of the land” (27). She also draws attention to the fact that different kinds of dispossession, such as loss of community, separation from the past, and forced relocation, are factors that contribute to the “deracination and loss of identity” that Erdrich’s characters experience (Jepson 26).

In *Tracks*, space is masterfully employed to support Louise Erdrich’s intention to delve into Native American identity and shed light on the oppression indigenous communities faced under colonial authority. Through Fleur’s deep devotion to her land and Nanapush’s storytelling, the novel illustrates the importance of landscape in Native American culture. At the same time, it underscores the devastating effects of colonialism, emphasizing the need for cultural preservation. As Nanapush reflects, “Our trouble came from living, from liquor and the dollar bill. We stumbled toward the government bait, never looking down, never noticing how the land was snatched from under us at every step” (4). This is a powerful moment of self-awareness that encapsulates the complexity of survival within a colonial system. At its core, *Tracks* is a love letter to Erdrich’s heritage providing an insightful perspective on the Native American experience. Her vision influenced later generations to reclaim the narrative around the treatment of Native peoples by colonial power through literature, as well as to engage in collective efforts for the preservation of Indigenous land and culture.

Although I was already familiar with Native American history and aware of the struggles Indigenous people faced under colonial authority, Erdrich’s storytelling and characters made the events feel more personal. Reading and analyzing *Tracks* felt like documenting history from the point of view that has been ignored for centuries in the favor of Western narratives. The use of oral narration, a huge part of Native tradition, further emphasized how important it is for indigenous voices to finally be heard. What was also very striking to me was the tendency history has to repeat itself. The new immigration policies in the US, the ICE raids that lead to protests in LA, suddenly seemed too familiar. The signs protesters held in defense of immigrant rights called America a “stolen land,” focusing on the fact that no one can be “illegal” in a nation that was shaped by immigration. All of this made me reflect on the treatment of Native Americans, finding similarities between that and the immigration arrests but also the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, Palestine.

My collage, inspired by *Tracks*, visually reflects the novel's central themes of familial bonds, survival, and cultural continuity. At its center, the book cover makes it clear that the surrounding imagery is in some way related to the plot of the novel and the themes discussed in it. The scene of the two Native women in Regalia—sitting together, one tending to the other's hair—brings to mind themes of intergenerational power and matriarchal knowledge, strongly represented by characters like Nanapush or Fleur. In the background, the horseback riders stand for mobility and resistance, as horses are often used in indigenous art to denote autonomy and untamed spirit. The canyon scenes, although not present in the novel, create a sense of vastness that is not restricted by geographical boundaries, echoing themes of freedom and resilience. At the same time, they reflect the long history of Native presence on the continent, along with the endurance of Indigenous people in the face of oppressive forces. The feathers, beadwork, and other traditional objects in the collage call back to the need for cultural preservation, especially against assimilation, which is central in *Tracks*. Overall, the collage captures the novel's interwoven narratives, suggesting a history that is held together through storytelling, tradition, and the determination to survive.

Works Cited

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