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Beyond Colonization: Polyphony, Alterity, Humor and Wisdom in Louise Erdrich's *Four Souls*

Louise Erdrich's novel *Four Souls* presents complex and sometimes surprising alliances. Her characters engage in a discourse well beyond that which can be read as a simple criticism of historical practices of allotment and land ownership. Rather than dichotomize good and evil—although elements of the latter loom large—Erdrich emphasizes relationships, in order to challenge perceptions of property, sexuality and colonization. In “Not an Indian Tradition: The Sexual Colonization of Native Peoples,” Andrea Smith argues that “violence does not simply occur within the process of colonialism,” but that “colonialism is itself structured by the logic of sexual violence” (70). *Four Souls* not only highlights this structural reliance of colonization on sexual violence, but furthermore suggests that decolonization premised on a close attention to “alterity” potentially leads to sexual self-determination. *Four Souls* leads readers into complex engagement with such alterity through, for instance, its depictions of Nanapush, Fleur, Margaret, Fantan and other characters, who re-inhabit a realm of inter-relationships—not only with other humans but ancestor spirits and the plants/animals/habitats that sustain these relationships. Reading *Four Souls* in light of Giles Gunn's *The Culture of Criticism and The Criticism of Culture*, Michel Foucault's “Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” and Smith's “Not an Indian Tradition,” I examine the ways in which Erdrich's

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storytelling engages the complexities of self, community, and the continual efforts her characters employ to “practice” the kind of “freedom” Foucault’s ethics demand.

Erdrich’s novel carries the dynamic interplay of history, language, culture, and human relationships such that the work itself creates an alterity that challenges traditional Western dichotomies between self and other, past and present, hero and oppressed. Thus, although Erdrich’s novel concurs with Smith’s assessments of “colonialism” being “structured by the logic of sexual violence,” *Four Souls* delves into the relationships that continue to be shaped by history and culture, so that the story can emerge from “Under the Ground” (the name of an important character in the novel, the mother of the first character whose name was “*Four Souls*”) with a resonance that provides a measure of hope, sustained by the potential for decolonization. This decolonization is premised on the polyphony of the novel itself, which is populated by a host of characters, including Fleur Pillager, who *says* very little but effects change through her actions. Fleur’s actions have been shaped by the ethics of her tribal, familial, and female powers. Erdrich is not creating a heroic or an anti-heroic ontology, but rather a human, and thus flawed model of co-existence. Despite their apparent flaws, each of the novel’s characters and each of its voices hold wisdom and potential for change—for a kind of “becom[ing]” the words of Nanapush describe. Douglas Andrew Barnim draws on this “becom[ing]” and presents an astute inquiry into trauma, its historical legacies, and Erdrich’s complex engagement with “becoming” in relation to “healing.” I depart from Barnim, however, in his suggestion that change is the same as progress. He explains that “*Four Souls* addresses the healing of the Ojibwe people through a reposition of identity in terms of returning to the land and an embrace of change—i.e. progress” (63). The word “progress” is too reminiscent of the settler-colonial approach toward indigenous peoples to portray the “embrace of change” (63) evident within the novel. Barnim explains that although “the hybrid identity is, in some cases, questionable as an interpretive lens through which to examine the history of a people that continue to be colonized” (65), he sees this lens as beneficial because it “offers a way of tracing the oscillation that Erdrich’s characters undergo in their search for identity” (65-66).

I concur with Barnim’s assessment that “Erdrich’s characters never possess static identities” and that they challenge readers to remain aware of the potential for healing through an “embrace of change” (63), yet I question his assertion that “they oscillate between cultural extremes” (66), because the idea of “oscillat[ing]” presents a dichotomy, a binary. His attention to Nanapush as one who “facilitates the narrative memory of Native trauma” (56) is astute, and his analysis opens with important, dynamic inquiries. However, when Barnim asserts that “Nanapush himself is a hybrid of the seemingly dichotomous cultures” and that Fleur is “a character symbolic of the Ojibwe” (56) these assertions present a fixity and an overgeneralization, which serve to undermine his otherwise useful ideas that focus on healing through culturally-determined means.

Neither can one person function as a “symbol” of an entire people, nor can a trickster narrator like Nanpush be accurately fixed as the “hybrid of” binaries. My challenge to the critical lens of “hybridity” within the context of Erdrich’s novel meets a useful rebuttal in the work of Summer Harrison, whose emphasis on hybridity depends upon the trickster identity. She explains that the trickster appears not only among the characters, such as Nanapush, but through the author and the reader, in a relational and dynamic way. Harrison explains that “the reader must hybridize both narrators’ accounts to understand Fleur’s attempt to define her own identity” (58). Such multiple occurrences and intersectional dynamics require the reader to become, as Harrison explains, “a trickster” in her or his own role, as the characters engage in dialogue with one another and with the reader. Barnim and Harrison both present useful inquiries into the dynamic nature of “self” within Erdrich’s novel and has therefore influenced this study in terms of my discussion of self-determination. The term has political as well as social, cultural, and literary importance.

American Indian¹ insistence on self-determination is evident in Erdrich’s novel, which depicts community as a multitude of human relationships, and elaborates on self- and other-sustaining functions of sexual intimacy, love, and marriage. Sexuality itself is not demonized but rendered through wit and humor as a complex set of relationships with self and other that has the power to create what can be “evil” (and is evident in historical contexts) yet also holds the potential for that which is *better* than good. Sexual relationships literally hold the power for creation, for healing, for a future to exist at all. In his “Ethics of the Concern for the Self,” Michel Foucault maintains that the “game” of power is premised always on “relationships.” He specifies his definition of “games” as “a set of rules by which truth is produced” (297). This is useful in light of understanding Nanapush, one of three narrators who deliver *Four Souls* to readers. Nanapush cuts through simplistic themes of private property, colonization, and oppression when he says that “we [humans] are dreams, blasts, shadows [...so that] this stub of a grain dealer’s pencil that moves across the page of paper is not real, either, and that the truth lies on the other side of even these words” (58). When “the set of rules” created by certain people negates the value of land except for its monetary price, and when those rules also include the commodification of women, the dynamic is no longer a “game” of “truth” finding, in Foucault’s terms. Foucault’s “concern for the self” before the concern “for others,” as a strategy toward ethical behavior, becomes useful in considering the multi-vocal experience of reading *Four Souls*, which requires paying close attention to relationships.

1 Here American Indian is used, rather than Native American, because the reference is to self-determination, which has historical and legal relevance, particularly within the constructs of the naming of legislation, such as the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 (Public Law 93-638).

Erdrich's narrative approach in *Four Souls* can be illuminated through Gunn's discussion of the "polyphonic" (131). As in Gunn's characterization of humanistic discourse, *Four Souls* illustrates that the extension of self to social and political spheres is implicit in the attention given to ethos, to the *character* one develops in order to engage others. Foucault cites Socrates as an example of such a character, who, as "a person who took proper care of himself would [...] be able to conduct himself properly in relation to others and for others" (286). In Foucault's assertion that "care of the self is ethically prior [to care of others] in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior" we see the formation of some of the "rules" of a "game" in which "limiting and controlling" one's power is crucial. We also see a connection between *character* as a practice/result of *ethos* (ethics) and the polyphony of characters in *Four Souls* as they gain wisdom of "self" and of "other." The novel is premised upon the destruction and losses that resulted from contact, the transmittal of diseases, colonization, and the intended de-humanization of Native people. This includes not only the capture of lands but the intentional, planned, and often successful destruction of indigenous languages and cultural practices.

In the context of colonization, the very opposite dynamic of that which Foucault encourages was at play: rather than "limiting and controlling" power, the extension and advancement of power were the prerogatives. When Smith argues that "sexual violence is not simply a tool of patriarchy, but it is also a tool of colonialism and racism," she begins her discourse with a challenge to a dichotomous construction, not unlike the wisdom approach Erdrich has employed. Smith cites Susan Brownmiller's observation that rape "is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" (71) in order to problematize its overly simple "nothing more or less" much more than to challenge the question of "intimidation" and "fear." This simplification renders the statement "inadequate," according to Kimberle Crenshaw, whose analyses Smith discusses in order to emphasize "racism and classism" and to shed light on colonization as an embodiment of sexual violence. Further underscoring colonialism objectification of women, Smith cites Aime Césaire's concise, simplified definition, which is so pared down that even the word *equals* is replaced by the equal sign: "colonization='thingification'" (74). Correspondingly, in the still colonial or un-decolonized relationships between landscapes, other people, places, history, and culture depicted in *Four Souls*, that which is named as chattel (thingified) can be owned and thus mined for its value in the market economy. Erdrich's characters are embodied within the dynamic roles of humans who have been – in the case of Fleur Pillager and other women in the novel—colonized through marriage, and marriage in this context equaled the ownership not only of the woman's body, but of lands and bodies of water as well.

In nineteenth-century America, real-life counterparts to characters such as John James Mauser in Erdrich's novel sought to marry Native women order to *access land*. In depicting these marriages of expediency, *Four Souls* not only castigates the woman's loss

of her freedom, but the ecological destruction that followed, as thus acquired lands were frequently mined, for example. The families, the tribes, as well as other disenfranchised groups that have historically *not* had a voice in decisions of land ownership are given voice by Erdrich through characters, including Nanapush, in a polyphonic embodiment of community, culture, and inhabitation. When he asserts, in light of a turn toward what would become industrial agriculture, that “the stub of a grain dealer’s pencil that moves across the page of paper is not real [...] and that the truth lies on the other side of even these words” (58), Nanapush problematizes the literal, the written word as he takes a postmodern, polyphonic approach to ethics.

Foucault’s statement that the “Greeks problematized their freedom, and the freedom of the individual, as an ethical problem” has import for a return to “power, command” (286). It underscores that the “care of the self” is always in “complex relationships with others.” This is true for human connections, but as Erdrich points out, “others” include species such as trees and mammals. Such “care” required a diversity of approaches to living on the land rather than a single-minded attention to mining or clear-cut logging. After “settlement,” a combination of hunting, fishing, and horticulture, the lands and waterways were forced to sustain a single plan: farming. To make matters even worse, land was bought and sold with no attention to sustainable practices. In the words of Nanapush:

Land dwindled until there wasn’t enough to call a hunting territory. That was because we were supposed to learn to farm in the chimookomaan [white man’s] way, using toothed machines and clumsy, big horses to pull them. [...]

Just as the first of us had failed at growing or herding or plowing the fields, we were told we could sign a piece of paper and get money for our land, but that no one would take the land until we paid the money back. Mortgage, this was called. This piece of banker’s cleverness sounded good to many. I spoke against this trick, but who listened to old Nanapush? (80)

To be clear, Erdrich’s character Nanapush is not without his own complexities and human flaws. His sometimes hapless and often humorous actions convey to readers that Erdrich is neither deifying nor putting on a pedestal this single character. Rather, his voice, often *not heard* even by his own people (as noted above) becomes the voice of the historian, the one who digs, the one who problematizes. Nanapush continues his story of the land, the results of the pressure to farm that emerged full force from the Allotment Agents:

People signed the paper. Got money. Some farmed. Others came home night after night for months full of whiskey and food. Suddenly the foreclosure notice was handed out and the land was barred. It belonged to someone else. Now it appeared our people would turn into a wandering bunch, begging at the back

doors of white houses and town buildings. Then laws were passed to outlaw begging and even that was solved. No laws were passed to forbid starvation, though, and so the Anishinaabeg were free to do just that.

Yes, we were becoming a solved problem. That's what I am saying. Who worries about the dead? They are safe in the ground. (79)

Foucault asserts that “domination caused by an unjustified political system” arises when power relations are hierarchical and thus unequal. It is vital to distinguish between being “the head of household” (283) and being a master (of slaves or of a dominated wife, for example.) Foucault provides a clear direction for a kind of decolonization centered on these distinctions: the goal is “to acquire the rules of law, the management techniques, and also the morality, the *ēthos*, the practice of the self, that will allow us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible” (298).

The voices in Erdrich's novel emerge from a variety of sources, including the first person narration delivered by three of the living characters: Nanapush, Polly Elizabeth, and Margaret. Those who *speak*, however, come to include not only living characters, such as Fleur—through limited dialogue and through her silences, such as her resistance to naming her son any name at all, and her actions, such as literally standing up to the woman who attempts to shame Polly Elizabeth—but also she who is called “Under the Ground,” Fleur's grandmother.

This Ojibwe woman's name was “Fanny” until she transformed herself and her name by having “herself buried alive in a birch-bark covering” and staying “connected only to the upper world by a breathing straw” (49), then emerging from that earth with “her power” and her abilities to heal. While she was there, transforming, “old men drummed and the women sang to give her courage, but all that they could see from the soft earth of her grave was the tube of rawhide” (50), the breathing straw. A simpler story would conclude with a “happily ever after” when the transformation was complete. In this context of alterity, however, names have power beyond the simple dichotomies of happy/sad, good/bad. Nanapush explains that when she took the name “*Four Souls*,” that “name influenced Fleur's actions and told her what to do” (57). Thus the power of “voice” in Erdrich's novel looms eloquently large, both above and below the ground. Because “each of us has an original [which is the name no one speaks] living somewhere underneath the shadow of our daily life” (58), so, too, does the character Polly Elizabeth have a “shadow side.” Through the course of the novel, this becomes her most enlightened and “happiest” side. This transformation is shaped by her relationships within the white, Ojibwe, and mixed families she comes to know intimately.

Polly Elizabeth, the white woman who at first embodies such a depth of racism as to seem a caricature, is poignantly changed by inhabiting the home of Fleur. Erdrich will not privilege the Native over the “other” who is white in simplistic dichotomies.

Rather, her novel begins to enact a kind of decolonization with polyphonic resonance, so that such limitations are no longer evident, and such boundaries and dichotomies are diminished. When we are first introduced to Polly Elizabeth, she is simply known as Ms. Gheen, the sister-in-law of John James Mauser. She is describing the house Mauser has built “on the most exclusive ridge in the city,” with its “pure white” presence, as “pristine as a cake in the window of a bakery shop.” We are aware of the *caricature quality* of the white-ness of it all, including even nature/ even the out-of-doors becoming whitewashed with “white deer at the gate, dusted with a sugar powder, paw[ing] delicately” as they “nosed the glittering air” (11). Here caricature builds to cliché, as readers cannot help but see the explicit reference to having her “cake” and eating it too, as even the suggestion of the un-tamed world requires “sugar” coating and a relegated place “at the gate,” but never engaged nor confronted nor connected with directly.

By the time that Fleur becomes the Mistress Mauser, Polly Elizabeth’s attempts to better understand and embody her own sexuality are on their dynamic course, giving the novel another measure of alterity, as it confronts a postmodern engagement of “colonization” as well as a potential for transformation. This is realized through a multitude of characters and a polyphonic, narrative unfolding. For example, Polly Elizabeth’s initial treatment of Fleur is dismissive, as she is “anxious to hire” her so that she has “a woman specifically to launder, to live in the basement and use the soapstone tubs and iron taps to scald and renew the sheets as Fantan [the manservant to the lord of the home] carted them down and up, down and up, and down again” (13). The ironies of this initial set-up of hierarchies run deep, as the very “sweat” which must be “scalded” from the sheets is the bodily fluid of the materially wealthy Mauser, her brother-in-law, who is, we come to find, suffering from what will be diagnosed as “a locomotor ataxia and melancholic neuralgia complicated by a rare male cholerosis, all brought on by a damming of the sperm” (39). The doctor, upon rendering this diagnosis, asks the ostensibly *placid* wife, thus named “Placide,” where she thinks this ejaculatory material might go. The couple have been practicing what Polly Elizabeth calls “karezza,” which in Placide’s words, “exercises the mutual power of our wills [...] and the power of the heart” [...] to “collect and act on loving thoughts.” Placide suggests that this allows “a conscious conservation of creative energy,” and insists to the perplexed doctor that “It has had the most exciting effect on my artistic output” (37).

The fact that Polly Elizabeth is listening to her sister explain this (to the physician and her sister’s husband) through a glass propped up against the door that separates them is both comedic and symbolic. Thus, when the interview is completed, with the advice from the doctor that previous treatments had included placing his “posterior against a cold wall” and “immersion of the male member into a basin of warm water,” it is not surprising that Polly Elizabeth was so overcome with bouts of laughter, that “it was at least half an hour before [she] could compose [her] features and calm [her] nerves suffi-

ciently” to emerge from the room from which she eavesdropped. The doctor answers his own question to Placide, as to where this unresolved matter might go, this sperm that has been reserved: “To the brain!” he explains. “To the brain.” Within this chapter, which is titled “Karezza,” Polly Elizabeth’s laughter takes on the dimensions of symbolic meaning and comedic levity. The laughter is the first release we observe from this otherwise tidy and stiff sister-in-law. The novel traces, lightly though poignantly, her coming of age in sexual terms. This reaches its conclusion with Polly Elizabeth’s love for Fantan, but not before the many-leveled embodiments of her racism, her “white cake” of having and eating too, and her disgust at seeing “the savage woman I hired to scrub clothes” become dear to her heart are dynamic engagements with history and relationships Erdrich presents in the novel.

When Polly Elizabeth sees Fleur “bent over brother-in-law [...] like some kind of bird,” she calls her “[h]awk-winged and territorial,” and describes “her brown skirt spread” open, with all its sexual connotations (19). There is depth and irony, however, in this act, as Fleur is securing the safety of Mauser, is nursing not seducing him. The scene is further complicated by the image of Fleur and Fantan together. With the help of Fantan, who “kneeling” next to Mauser’s body that has just survived a seizure, Fleur is tending to this man’s needs. What Polly Elizabeth does not know is that Fleur intends to nurse him back to health only so that she can kill him. Nanapush tells us: “She wanted the man healthy so that she could destroy him fresh.” However, Polly Elizabeth is not privy to Nanapush, his wisdom and his hapless complexities. She sees only the intimacies, first between her brother-in-law and a Native servant, then between Fantan and Fleur, as they tend to the limp body of the master of the house, “the heavy and relaxed form between them” (19). This closeness is only an outward reminder of what they share in the hidden chambers of their bodies, the Native blood. Such closeness between them is, at this moment, suggested in the word “form” but disappears just as quickly. Most central to this scene is the literal form of a man who is both “master” and fool, according to the “game” (Foucault) of power play that Erdrich’s novel masters in its polyphonic (Gunn) complexities. Polly Elizabeth concludes that the “words form against the inside of my skull [and although] I can see them [,][t]hey make no sense and yet compel me with their vehemence” (19). Not until Polly Elizabeth “forgets the borders” of her own body, through loving Fleur’s half-Native child, in deeply compassionate care-giving instincts, and loving Fleur, as a sister, a dearest of friends, does she begin to make “sense” of the place she inhabits, in her body, and in place, on the lands of the *Anishinaabeg* (the *Ojibwe*) people she so clearly attempted to disdain.

The complexities of land and human life are so deeply ingrained in the first chapters of *Four Souls* that throughout the novel the reader cannot separate Mauser’s estate from the mining it necessitated. This is not the toxic mining that Winona LaDuke addresses in her research of “uranium production [...] 100 percent” of which takes place on or near

Indian land (1993; qtd in Smith 81). Nor is this a reference to the “650 nuclear explosions on Western Shoshone land at the Nevada test site” from which “[f]ifty percent of these underground tests have leaked radiation into the atmosphere” (Taliman, 1991; qtd in Smith 81). Still, Erdrich is well aware that Native peoples are considered “the expendable ones” and are therefore “situated to suffer the brunt of environmental destruction so that colonizers can continue to be in denial about the fact that they will also eventually be affected” in what Cesaire notes as “the boomerang effect of colonization” (qtd in Smith 81). The architecture of Mauser’s estate required that the “soundest of the wood [be] processed right at the edge of the city” and the “best brownstone came from an island called Gichi gami” (5). Nanapush describes a time when “the ground of the island was covered with mammoth basswood that scented the air over the lake, for miles out, with a swimming fragrance of such supernal sweet innocence that those first priests who came to steal Ojibwe souls, penetrating deeper into the heart of the world, cried out not knowing whether God or the devil tempted them” (5). When Mauser’s house was built, “there was more than enough brownstone quarried, cut, hand-finished, shipped, and hauled uphill, for the construction” [and after all] “it proved easy and profitable to deal with the Indian agent Tatro who won a personal commission for discovering that due to a recent government decision the land upon which [the best] trees grew was tax forfeit from one Indian, just a woman—she could go elsewhere” and “there was no problem about moving the lumber crews in” (6). Not only was there wood to be had, despite the fact that by “now the island [Gichi gami] was stripped of trees”; there was slate for the roof shingles, and the “chimneys were constructed of a type of brick requiring the addition of blood, and so, baked in the vicinity of a slaughterhouse, they would exude when there was a fire lights a scorched, physical odor” (7). The descriptions of the necessity of “mining” for the adornments of the house at first seem to reach their apex with this description from Nanapush: “the Moorish-inspired turned railings” required iron that was “mined on the Mesabi Range by Norwegians and Sammi so gut-shot with hunger they didn’t care if they were trespassing on anybody’s hunting ground or not and just kept on digging deeper, deeper into the earth” (7). However, there is more, much more to raise the concern of those interested in a more socially-just wisdom-inquiry in the humanities. These include the sound of “women” as they “coughed in basements of a fabric warehouse” and the gunning down of “more than a hundred sandhill cranes” (7). Such a multiplicity of descriptions serves to describe the momentum of colonization, with its violent and often literally or symbolically sexual references from mining to clearcut logging to inhabitation of a home on the very land that was the “same ground” where “[d]uring a bright thaw in the moon of little spirit, an Ojibwe woman gave birth” (4) to a child. This occasion of his birth was not so surprising, for this was “high ground” that had been “a favorite spot for making camp in those original years before settlement” (4).

Although the descriptions of the mining seem most poignant in Nanapush’s assess-

ment of the necessities of such a manor, providing the most evidence for this kind of sexual colonization Smith contends, there is something more haunting to me as a reader, and that is the relationship between Mauser, his wife Placide, and the lynx he “killed near the building site” (7). For in that moment, it is not so much that the colonizer set the “one claw [...] in gold and hung [it] off the watch fob” that dangled from his waistcoat; nor is it the fact that he “presented his wife with a thick spotted muff made to the mold of her tender hands” with the fur of the feline. The embodiment of sexual violence against Natives was most fully realized in Placide’s calling it “ever after as ‘our first housecat,’” for in this vocalization the conflation of the wild and domesticated, the killing for pleasure and adornment rather than for protection and nourishment is presented. The act of hunting becomes counter to need, becomes a way for Mauser to attempt to seduce that which he already owns. A bizarre turning of the tables occurs when we are told that she “meowed at him a little,” which we first experience as flirtation, as her own brief attempt at seduction, but then we are told that “she was much too well brought up to do more than that and stiffened harder than the iron banisters when she was touched” (7). This is where we first learn of her aversion to Mauser, which we may read as her being frigid, for we are told that “to make love to her was for young Mr. Mauser like touching the frozen body of a window mannequin” but later realize is particular to this coupling, to her marriage to Mauser. For she was drawn to her art teacher, we learn from Polly Elizabeth, and was “practicing karezza” with him while still married to her husband. Thus the wife of Mauser does seem to hold some mastery over her husband, whom we at first assume is the colonizer who embodies fully the violence upon which his house was erected. This notion is problematized by not only the power that Fleur holds over him but Placide, as well, in their complex marital arrangement.

The question of who is who, as well as which boundaries hold and which dissolve become crucial to the dynamic interplay of the games of poignant “truths” (in Foucault’s sense of power). Epiphanies are realized through the humor that flows through Erdrich’s novel like an un-dammable river of history, tragedy, and possibility. So much seems to hinge on Fleur, who strategically orchestrates the killing of Mauser. Through a mixture of medicine and domestic chores, alliances and the trust built from those relationships, Fleur sets about her task of strengthening Mauser so that she can kill him “fresh,” and thus make him suffer. When she places the knife against his neck and says “I have come here to kill you,” it is impossible to say who is more surprised at his response, the reader or Fleur herself. “What took you so long?” Mauser asks, and the two begin to converse in Ojibwe. She is further surprised when he says, in answer to her question “Who am I?”, “You’re a relative of one of the women I wronged” (44). Outraged, she replies “One of them? *Awanen*? I am the woman whose land you stole.” His recognition is internal, confused, shedding light on the history we guessed but are now given from inside his confusion:

Mauser was silent. He'd taken the land of so many it was impossible that he should remember just who they were. His mind was reeling back through titles and false transfers and quitclaim deeds. He thought he'd had her figured. Who could she be? (44)

Among the most compelling elements of Erdrich's work is that when the reader thinks we have someone "figured," that imagined construction is undone, problematized by the complexities of a shared history, one in which there is potential for healing, even after such violence.

This is not a simple story nor is the healing going to be a simple process. The novel seems at first premised upon Fleur as hero. Will she kill Mauser now? Will she kill him later? Will that even be the central action of the story? Not until Margaret, the wife of Nanapush, creates the Medicine Dress and invites Fleur to wear it do we see that, just as the dress—something so vitally important—must "begin where all things begin—with the death of something else" (176), so too must Fleur suffer in order to be transformed. Thus, the hero of the story is not a single person, not necessarily Fleur, although she vividly becomes an "agent" of change in the most evidently postmodern sense of understanding agency. The story needs all its characters for "The Healing" (of the final chapter's title) to occur. Fleur's transformation, her "healing," requires that she is "driven past her limit" by the "tiny spirits" Margaret predicts will drive her. Yet Margaret must sew the dress, must experience the accidental "snaring" by her love, Nanapush. She must live the story of her life and participate in the story of Fleur's life, the life of her un-named boy child, and so on, like the many drops of rainwater in the sacred lake, or the many stitches required to complete the medicine dress, which began with the snaring that almost killed Margaret and then continued with the bones of the "cow moose" that her sons had to kill "without the use of any white man's weapons" (176). Fleur will need to meet Margaret "halfway there," in order to receive the medicine of the stitches; only through "let[ing] the dress kill [her]" can she "[l]et the dress save [her]" so that she can "walk the middle way" (206) to "change and become" (210).

Smith's assessment that "[w]omen of color do not just face quantitatively more issues when they suffer violence (that is, media attention, language, barriers, lack of support in the judicial system, etc) but their experience is qualitatively different from that of white women" (71) is relevant in the novel. When Smith describes her work as a crisis counselor, and details the experience that "every Native survivor I have ever counseled said to me at one point, 'I wish I was no longer Indian'" (*Native American...*116), I am moved to suggest that Erdrich is presenting a counterpoint to that dynamic in a precise way. She is doing so, if not through her own cognizance of such "experience," then simply because a story as good as Erdrich's will find itself accessing the "truths" that Foucault explains as the result of the "game" of ethics. The reason, Smith argues, that one might

no longer “wish [to be] Indian” is because of the driving paradigm of institutionalized racism, that Native people are “dirty”; thus they are considered sexually violable and ‘rapable’ [...and] in patriarchal thinking, only a body that is “pure” can be violated” (73). For Erdrich, *The Medicine Dress* represents another *side* of women, embodied in the “sewing” that begets a transformative healing. The wife of Nanapush, Margaret Kashpaw, tells us that “to sew is to pray” as “[w]e women turn things inside out and set things right.” Margaret, in creating the medicine dress, teaches us that “[w]e salvage what we can of human garments [...]. Sometimes our stitches stutter and slow... Other times, the tension in the stitches might be too tight because of tears.” Not only do the Ojibwe women in the novel embrace their Indian-ness, so too does Polly Elizabeth become her truest self when she stops creating borders between herself and other women. It is only after she begins to love Fleur, and Fleur’s son, that she is able to express the following:

These were the happiest and most requited times of my existence. [...] Sometimes I gazed so long into the baby’s face that I forgot my own face. Or I touched the shining skin and forgot my own borders, melted skin through skin. As I made my way home each night, I had to remind myself that he was birthed of Fleur, belonged to Mauser, that I was nothing and no relation. Yet I had given away my own heart, and once that’s done there is no easy way to take it back. (69)

One of the most curious words in this passage is “requited,” because so often we hear this dynamic only in the negative, only as “un.” Polly Elizabeth not only expresses her lack of “borders” in words; her actions embody the ironies of colonization and the history of racism in the United States. In the eighteenth century, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur described the surprising dynamic that “[t]housands of Europeans [have become] Indians, and we have not example of even one of these Aborigines having from choice become Europeans!” (qtd in Smith 77). Smith asserts that the fact that “a number of white people chose to live among Indian people while virtually no Indians chose voluntarily to live among the colonists” had much to do with the “egalitarian nature [of Indian life] posing a threat to the ability of white men to continue their ownership of white women because they belie patriarchy’s defense of itself as ‘normal’” (77).

Smith’s suggestion that all Natives share “egalitarian” societal practices is a generalization. However, oft-cited and more accurately generalize-able, is that violence against women is not found in the records of Indian/Native American life and culture. Smith cites William Apess (Pequot) who “once stated in the 1800s: ‘Where in the records of Indian barbarity, can we point to a violated female?’” (77) She goes on to cite Brigadier General James Clinton of the continental Army, who “said to his soldiers as they were sent off to destroy the Iroquois Nation in 1779: ‘Bad as the savages are, they never violate the chastity of any women, their prisoners’” (77). Smith concludes this section of her

essay with the assertion that the “demonization of Native women, then, is part of white men’s desires to maintain control over white women” (78). This a potent statement in the context of history and sheds light on the *Four Souls* (and more) in Erdrich’s fiction. Polly Elizabeth concludes her chapter “The Fortune” with these words:

Everything that happened since I answered the door to Fleur was leading up to this. Warm sun falls on us through diamonds of lead glass as we work. If I am a fool, I am proud to be one. I have married one servant and declared another my sister. My husband and I do not speak in flows of words, but we connect by the heartstrings and by laughter and by signs. I am that rare thing thought only to exist in death. I am a happy woman. (161)

She is engaging in the “work” of living in community, a habitat of human to human relationships as well as deep and significant relationships with the land and the bodies of water that sustain us.

Fleur, too, will be transformed within the pages of this novel, but not as a result of what she thought was the best path: revenge. Rather, the Medicine Dress, the sewn fragments, will assist her in a journey that will purge her from the alcohol that has also colonized her body, and return her to the influence of the spirits of her ancestors, that will heal her. She needs, however, to become “brave enough to experience fear” and at that time “to ask the dress for its name and plead for it to help [her]” (206). As much as we might admire Fleur for the heroics she seeks to employ, Margaret teaches us that she also must carry humility: “If you ask humbly enough, the dress will tell you, and if you have the strength to accept the name, then the dress will give its name to your spirit” (207). The act of taking a false name was a big problem for Fleur; it is arguably what gets her into so much trouble. When Margaret explains, “Your name will live inside of you,” we realize that this is not exactly the opposite of colonization, but a kind of re-inhabitation of self and place and culture. When she is told, “Your name will help you heal. Your name will tell you how long to live and when to give up life,” we understand that the name, which will arrive with the assistance of Medicine Dress must be a name that can sustain the heroics and the humility alike, so that a kind of “self-determination” is created, but not without the voices of the elders as support. Pollination and fertilization can be welcomed, as can work, and sustained community, and spirit, but as is evident in *Four Souls*, self-determination is only possible within the support of community. The community extends beyond the bounds of human to human ties, so that Margaret’s words to Fleur, “For you have been lonely so long, you nameless one, you spirit, and it will comfort you to finally be recognized here upon this earth” (207), remind us that being recognized requires a “concern for self” and for “others.” In Erdrich’s novel, we find ourselves engaging in change, in an always-dynamic “game” of finding the truths that sustain such rich relationships of becoming.

An article written in 1899, and cited in Smith, describes the “women of the Iroquois [as having] a public and influential position. They had a council of their own.... which had the initiative in the discussion [...] an orator of their own sex to present and speak for them.... Sometimes female chiefs (73). Smith investigates “how a politics of intersectionality might fundamentally shift how we analyze sexual/domestic violence” and Erdrich’s novel embraces such intersectionality to engage the relationships of the past, the present, and the future of Ojibwe/white truths and their consequences. Our humanities inquiry benefits, therefore, from an approach wherein “alterity” rather than a simple idea of “solidarity” is privileged.

Gunn outlines some typical dynamics that push humanities into the “far edges of the academic curriculum” (116) and he critiques them. Erdrich’s *Four Souls* provides an excellent example of literature that holds the potential for Gunn’s emphasis on alterity, in the dynamic engagement of polyphony. When Gunn returns to the humanities as “a kind of subject matter or body of material [...] scientific as well as philosophic, social as well as artistic, anthropological as well as religious” (126), it is easy to see how Erdrich’s novel fits so well into his goals for humanities discourse. In her complex, deeply engaging narrative a “given civilization has conducted its own self-scrutiny” (Gunn 126), while also scrutinizing the colonial powers that arguably raped not only the women, the land, but the history. *Four Souls* provides an engaging, fascinating narrative within which humanities scholars and classroom teachers alike can encounter the questions not only of colonization, sexuality, and violence but of discovering the self and others as poignantly tied to the bodies that nourish us (lakes and rivers for example) and those we inhabit. In the final words of the novel, Nanapush explains that the Ojibwe can “change and become” (210). Erdrich’s novel engages all of us in a process of becoming that is polyphonic, wisdom-based, and more ethically and socially just.

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