

SHAMANISM/CATHOLICISM: SCHISM AND SYNTHESIS IN SELECTED

NOVELS OF LOUISE ERDRICH

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SHAMANISM/CATHOLICISM: SCHISM AND SYNTHESIS IN THE NOVELS
OF LOUISE ERDRICH

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For my father, Jack Warren Camden

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PREFACE

When I was about four years old, my Uncle Bud picked me up from daycare around lunchtime one day. I remember seeing his light blue VW pull into the parking lot. He had a Beetle that was a few years older than the green one my father had driven. I suppose the teacher must have known he was coming and had me look out the front window for him. That part I don't remember, but I do remember the excitement I felt when I saw Uncle Bud get out of the car and walk toward me. I didn't know why he was there, and in my child's mind, I doubt I even *wondered* why he was there; I just knew he was and that I was happy for it. I remember getting into the car, and in that sketchy sleight of hand that memory plays, the next thing I remember is our walking slowly by the animals' cages at the zoo. I'm unsure how long we had been there, but I recall seeing apes and big cats before the emotion hit me.

I suppose I've always been quite sensitive, but likely at that point in time, only a few short months since my father "passed away" — as everyone kept telling me, whatever *that* meant — I was probably more so than usual. I cried. My uncle's face, raised eyebrows, pleading eyes passed before me, and then I looked at the cat again, a leopard, its spotted skin reflecting my own, and the

cat's face, raised eyebrows, hollow eyes, struck another chord in my tiny soul. I began sobbing inconsolably. Uncle Bud took my hand and gently led me away from there. Vividly I remember feeling that the animals, especially the cats, were sad, that they longed for something, that they too were crying but without tears. I gave them mine.

That impression has remained with me these many years, and I've spent significant time thinking about that one day and how it has affected me. I tend to notice right away when that same feeling arises, and I will sharpen my attention on a person or a situation whenever it does. Perhaps science could explain this feeling away quite neatly as a projection or as a chemical imbalance or as a sentimental journey, but I rather like to think that despite some rational explanation, there nevertheless exists within us an intuitive sense that is just as valid as our other five. So after much thought over many years, I've come to believe what happened that day is as simple as my sensing the leopard trapped in that zoo, an environment completely unnatural to him, longing for freedom, pleading in his soul to once again run free in the jungle and struggle for food and cope with starvation and compete for mates and contend with insects and not just be alive but really *live*. Foolish though it may be, I cannot escape the overwhelming feeling of that day, and I cannot abide any other explanation.

Last fall a similar impression struck me at the powwow in Austin. I'm unsure what I expected, attending a gathering of Native Americans held at a coliseum in a major city rather than in a tiny pueblo in the desert, but what greeted me was nevertheless surprising.

I was reminded of my paternal grandmother, who for most of her life quilted, a craft she had learned from her mother. Although she owned a sewing machine and knew well how to use it, she insisted that hand-sewn quilts possessed a quality that those made on a machine could not match, and despite her severe arthritis, she continued to make at least one quilt a year well into her eighties. In her quilts, one notices the absence of uniformity in the patterns and in the material and in the stitching—uneven here, crooked there—and this nuance, far from being an indication of imperfection, gives the quilt a personality and, dare I say, a soul. It is this soul that was in part missing at the powwow. But there was something else missing also.

The regalia the dancers wore, although bright and beautiful, was, upon close examination, fashioned from manufactured material and decorated with plastic beads. It struck me that even Native American ceremonial dress, although assembled in the US, was made in China, from whence the cloth and the beads surely originated. Hand-woven material dyed with roots or berries

and carefully crafted quill work were absent, and as I was confronted with the commercialization of an entire culture, I began to sense that old feeling again.

To me there also seemed to be great longing among this crowd, a collective void inherited from mothers and fathers and grandmothers and grandfathers, and the embodiment of that longing consisted in the meager attempts to imitate the material products representative of a thoroughly ancient culture, much like new habitats found at contemporary zoos create the illusion of natural surroundings yet fail to capture the essence of genuine freedom. I was sad. I left.

This sense is what draws me to the works of Louise Erdrich. She doesn't express it outright, but it's there between the lines, coursing through the humor and the beauty and the poetry and the pain, an absolute chasm separating what *was* and what *is*. Perhaps she reveals a bit of sentimentality for the past or a bit of resentment for the present, both human tendencies and both justified, but nevertheless her writing is a poignant and an artful revelation of what is surely an intangible void underlying Native America in a post-colonial land.

With this preface and in the following pages, I do not pretend to understand what it means to be Native American, nor do I wish to convey or even suggest a sympathetic viewpoint. But perhaps because, as C. G. Jung notes, "one can never possess a foreign land, because in foreign ground there live

foreign ancestral spirits, and so those who are born there are incarnations of foreign spirits" (Wehr 233), or perhaps because my Irish blood is tinged with the faint familiarity of having been colonized, or perhaps simply because I was literally a red-headed stepchild, I do hope that on some level I can relate to a sentiment of losing one's roots and one's identity and living within the vacuum of that absence. I hope to do justice to the spirit of Erdrich's writing.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: SYNCRETISM / SYNTHEISM

When two religious belief systems converge upon an individual, he or she faces a complex process of rejection, compromise, and/or assimilation of the contrasting theologies, which necessarily results in psychological upheaval. Subverting the very foundation of a society by imposing an entirely contrary belief system fractures an otherwise unified world view, and amid the resulting religious chaos, the individual suffers not only social but also psychological fragmentation. Such a schism arises in the works of Louise Erdrich as a cognitive dissonance that pervades the psyches of her characters. The germ of this ambivalence rests in the collective Anishinaabeg memory as the encroachment upon their religion by the Catholic Church, and the adaptive response to this encroachment consists in a continuum of syncretistic belief, thought, and action embodied in Erdrich's characters.

In her novels, *Love Medicine* (1984), *Tracks* (1988), *The Last Report on Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), and *Four Souls* (2004), Erdrich explores the nature of the nearly paralyzing effects Church doctrine had on her people as her characters negotiate the liminal space between Catholic religious dogma and

ancestral shamanic beliefs. Her characters struggle to find a spiritual home, shifting loyalties between these two psychologically incompatible belief systems, for they are torn asunder by the strict adherence required by the priest and the cultural cohesion represented in the shaman.

Erdrich recounts the indelible traces left upon the Anishinaabe people since the imposition of the Catholic Church, which, according to Karen McKinney, began obstinately converting the inhabitants of North America in the seventeenth century (2). French Jesuits, a particularly combative sect among the Catholic priesthood, pushed “tirelessly into the territory around the Great Lakes, attempting to convert the natives to Christianity,” and in the words of one priest, they went “to declare war against Infidelity, and to fight the Devil in the very heart of his country” (McKinney 2-3).

For the Anishinaabeg, their individualistic religious beliefs supported their social construct, which was nomadic and essentially decentralized, and they “believed that individuals, if their motives were pure, had the ability to find truth and spiritual solace within themselves” (McKinney 4). In this schema, the vision quest held prominence as the central event in a person’s life, for it was during those days of fasting and praying that a young person would, through a subjugation of consciousness, experience a numinous encounter with a guiding spirit, in Jungian terms an archetypal figure in the form of a personified animal

or ancestral hero, who would instruct the person in spiritual matters throughout the remainder of his or her life. According to Jung, “these ‘visions’ are far from being hallucinations or ecstatic states; they are spontaneous, visual images of fantasy” (*Archetypes* 190), and for Jung and others, there is no “mere” fantasy, for this occurrence represents an important broadening of consciousness accomplished by accessing the deeper recesses of knowledge and wisdom residing in the unconscious mind, a psychological terrain described in religious symbolism.

Contrary to this individualistic search for spiritual significance, many missionaries imposed a doctrine of forced assimilation that inhibited individual epistemology and instead replaced the independence fostered by the vision quest with reliance on the Church and its dogma. Moreover, certain French Jesuits and their predecessors carried out their mission to convert the natives with tremendous vigor, for they viewed their evangelical purpose as a life-or-death proposition. Against this onslaught, the Anishinaabe religion began a slow dilution over the next three hundred years until the clear distinction between Catholicism and shamanism became clouded, and the ancestral path toward individual wholeness became obscured by disuse.

The characters in Erdrich’s novels chart their spiritual courses, at times convergent and at others divergent, through the novels’ circuitous wilderness,

each searching for the path with only bits and pieces of a map of that territory. Her characters draw from disparate recollections of the past and from disjointed interpretations of the present, and in the process, they create a synthesis of spiritual beliefs, some shamanic and some Catholic. As a result of this spiritual patchwork, a religious syncretism, a blending of religious practices, reveals an ordering of theological thinking that becomes highly individualized within each character. This syncretism, or *syntheism* as I shall term it, appears as a coping mechanism each character develops in the face of the colliding theologies of shamanism and Catholicism.

In his discussion of religious syncretism, Eric Maroney describes Spain's response during the Reconquest to crypto-Jews, "who had converted to Christianity in order to remain in Spain, but who practised [sic] Jewish rites in private" (32). He goes on to discuss in detail the practice of Marranism, a form of crypto-Judaism practiced in isolated areas of the Iberian Peninsula, specifically small regions of Spain and Portugal (34). Here, during the Inquisition, Jewish religious practices developed quite in a vacuum, and there arose what Maroney calls "a collective schizophrenia," in which "people were forced to observe a religion [Catholicism] that was imposed upon them, and practise [sic] in secrecy the faith they preferred" (36). Because of both their separation from the Jewish community at large and the necessity for secrecy, which hindered their access to

resources and contributed to a “devolution of knowledge about the intricacies” of the Hebrew faith, Marranos developed rites and traditions all their own. Although most crypto-Jewish practices were eventually eradicated by mechanisms of the Inquisition, isolated bands continued to practice well into the twentieth century.

On the whole, the occurrence of Marranism and its history offer rather vivid similarities to events in North America pertinent to Native cultures, so due to the paucity of research on syncretism among Native Americans, Maroney’s work offers a point of reference for social and cultural comparisons. However, his work focuses on the wider phenomena associated with syncretism; whereas, herein the concern lies with the individual’s response, so although Maroney’s scholarship is thorough and concise, his terminology nevertheless only tangentially captures the essence of the individual’s experience, for he is hindered by the limited vocabulary available for discussing the interactions between faiths. *Syncretism* simply fails to embrace the nuances extant in those interactions. As David Lindenfeld suggests, because *syncretism* has become “more or less interchangeable with ‘hybridization,’ ‘creolization,’ and ‘bricolage,’” the term has been robbed of “any precision” (“Indigenous” 331).

This term *syncretism*, its relevance and precision, raises critical debate among religion and history scholars as some argue the word has no place in

research while others concede the term's legitimacy yet debate its semantics. Perhaps much of this debate persists because the term's very origin points to its questionable relevance for religion studies. According to Lindenfeld, Plutarch originated discussion of the term during the first century, referring to typically contentious Cretan clans whose practice was to unite when threatened by a common enemy ("Syncretism" 1). So a literal translation of *syn-cret-ism* would be "a joining together of Cretans," which, of course, has nothing at all to do with religion. Following this brief inception into scholarship, the term was forgotten for centuries until, during the Renaissance, Erasmus revived the word as it is more commonly used in contemporary scholarship "to identify the classical admixtures in Christian theology" (1). Erasmus borrowed the term to use as a broad stroke highlighting similarities between Christianity and other religions. Since then, syncretism has remained a vague term, vacillating between neutral and normative definitions as well as between positive and negative connotations (Kraft 143).

Although early academic discourse defined the term in a neutral sense as a "blending of religious ideas and practices, by means of which either one set adopts more or less thoroughly the principles of another or both are amalgamated in a more cosmopolitan and less polytheistic shape," the normative uses of *syncretism* eventually became a source for "prolific...theoretical debate"

in the 1960s and 70s (qtd in Kraft 143). In his 1971 *Category Formation and the History of Religions*, Robert Baird suggests the term should “be banned from religio-historical research,” for “processes of blending are...regular aspects of religious history. To describe something as syncretistic is therefore to say nothing at all” (Kraft 143-4). It seems Baird views modern religion as a somewhat chemical mixture (or dilution) that remains unfixed even after the social and cultural application of so much heat and agitation. He admits this “blending” of religious thought occurs yet simultaneously denies its relevance, which also seems to deny significant effects syncretism induces both institutionally and individually when two religions converge. Baird’s argument assumes a passive syncretism, happening in a vacuum, and he ignores the forced assimilation common to areas suffering colonization and, more importantly, the psychological distress of individuals in these areas. Baird critiques the map and ignores the territory.

Carsten Colpe and Michael Pye also argue syncretism is a process rather than a product, and in an attempt to isolate the term apart from others such as *acculturation, hybridization, creolization, etc.*, these scholars suggest “syncretism should be distinguished from ‘synthesis,’ the former being ‘the temporary ambiguous coexistence of elements from diverse religious and other contexts *within a coherent religious pattern,*’ the latter representing ‘the conclusion to a

process which is thereby completed'” (Kraft 145, my emphasis). This distinction recognizes the integration of tenets, symbols, or rituals between religious institutions, but the underlying assumption remains that the major religions are fixed entities sullied by the spiritual ills of their contagious neighbors.

As a more refined point, Lindenfeld describes syncretism as “an umbrella-like term, covering a wide variety of strategies and processes by which cultures with differing beliefs and practices adapt to one another” (“Syncretism” 1). The more positive connotation given the term derives in part from an emphasis on what Lindenfeld calls “syncretism from above,” which “refers to the conscious efforts of religious authorities to incorporate native elements in their attempt to bring new adherents into the fold” (2). This schema supposes elements from a pagan (usually read *godless*) religion become enmeshed with a more established religion such as Catholicism and thereby become attached to the liturgical or ritual or symbolic elements of the mass. In this manner, the supposed purity of a major religion is then diluted with tenacious impurities. However, church authorities likely see this borrowing as a necessary evil that at the end of the day cannot affect the revelatory sanctity of their brand of Truth. The negative connotation associated with the term becomes clear when considering what Lindenfeld calls “syncretism from below,” referring “to ways in which people incorporate elements from other religions more or less spontaneously, whether

consciously or not. Typically this occurs when a less powerful group encounters the religion of a more powerful group; syncretism thus becomes a means of adaptation and self-preservation" (2). Here the less powerful group regards similarities between its own religion and that of the more powerful group as affirmation for long-held religious beliefs. The result is an amalgamation of the two institutions, a belief system that recognizes duality and embraces theological diversity, at least in part. However, oftentimes the resulting heterodoxy becomes a point of social and cultural criticism as a bastardization of "pure" theology, a fragmentation of so called Truth, for as Maroney writes, "[m]ost members of a 'pure faith' dislike hybrid religions because they illustrate that barriers created between two 'pure' religious expressions are artificial and not inevitable" (43). Lindenfeld adds to the discussion of *syncretism* a more precise dialectic; however, there remains an imprecision that clings to the term, a vague assumption that institutional elasticity and individual experience are equivalent.

Edward Said and Mikhail Bakhtin add to the debate cultural perspectives that lean toward explaining syncretism as a type of "hybridity" (Kraft 146), which applies well enough to cultural aspects but again fails to describe what happens religiously and psychologically in the individual. Along borders, cultures do blend language, fashion, cuisine, transportation, tools, and architecture, yet these are aspects of convenience or taste or practicality, elements

of survival, communication, or comfort. For instance, Spanish explorers introduced horses to the native peoples of North America, and the people benefitted from this addition. Native Americans did not suffer as a result of this acculturation. Instead many tribes became expert horsemen, contributing to their success as hunters and warriors, already well-established aspects of their cultures.

Religion, however, is another matter altogether, for although it is categorically a part of culture, it is unnecessary for physical comfort or survival. Nevertheless, human beings have for millennia expressed a psychological *need*, so to speak, for belief. Positing religion as a psychological need also instigates controversy among scholars, from the devout theologian to the adamant existentialist, but although a variable exists within its expression in the form of so-called *syncretism*, religion, a grasping for images of the ineffable (Maroney 167), remains a constant throughout human history, suggesting a penchant for a religious approach to psychological order. Arguably, one's religion represents one's psychological constitution, for as Carl Jung suggests, "any religion which is rooted in the history of a people is...an expression of their psychology" (*Psychology* 97). Religion is not equivalent to psychology, but instilled at a young age and embedded in one's society, religion becomes an integral part of one's

psychological processes, involving not only the stories about but also the explanations of the mystery of human existence.

Discovering this mystery and the paths to this discovery has been the topic not only of many religious leaders and sages but also of many philosophers, teachers, and writers. Plato's allegory of the cave; the teachings of the Gnostics, the Alchemists, and the Kabbalists; the writings of Meister Eckhart and Emmanuel Swedenborg; the poems of William Blake; P.D. Ouspensky's *The Fourth Way*, Maurice Nicoll's *The New Man*, and even Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* all point to a higher level of consciousness attainable through some mysterious process that eludes most of mankind. As Blake writes, "All religions are one" (19), so it is the attainment of this higher level of consciousness, of which all mythologies consist and on which all religions expound, that confounds even the most pious adherent, for the *knowledge* of truth (Truth) and the *understanding* of truth (Good) exist on different planes. Maurice Nicoll writes, "[w]e know from history that all religious quarrels and persecutions have arisen from matters of doctrine—that is, from the side of *what is the Truth*—the side of knowledge and opinion, alone" (39). So it is perhaps this gulf separating the literal knowledge of doctrine from the esoteric meaning behind it that underlies syncretism, whether passive or aggressive, and impinges upon the individual psychological development of spiritual independence.

Again, Nicoll writes, “[p]eople...cling to Truth as an end and so feel their doctrinal differences, whether religious or political, most easily” (41). For an individual facing the bombardment of what is essentially his or her psyche, these differences begin to cloud the path and belief turns to doubt.

The experience of the individual determines what is most pertinent when discussing syncretism, and much of the other intellectual debate comprises so much chatter about abstract ideals and knowledge that despite the theoretical discourse and its contribution to academia nevertheless perpetuates what Jean Baudrillard calls “simulation...an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes” (2). The religious institution comprises this “operational double,” and much of the academic discussion on syncretism seems bound up at the institutional level, ignoring individual experience.

The institution, however, often impedes the path to higher consciousness, for it raises itself up as the source of sovereign virtue while stripping the individual of his religious initiative. The institution purports to hold the answers to spiritual mysteries and reassures followers of their sanctity as a part of the institution. Yet each follower has unwittingly relinquished his individuality and in large part his responsibility for treading his own path toward higher

consciousness. In a chapter titled "The New Idol," Nietzsche writes, "[a] state is called the coldest of all cold monsters. Coldly lieth it also, and this lie creepeth from its mouth: 'I, the state, am the people...[on] earth there is nothing greater than I: it is I who am the regulating finger of God'" (*Zara* 45). The people of the state, the "herd," as Nietzsche calls them, participate in this institutional idolatry at the expense of their own freedom and, given the right circumstances, at the expense of the *other's* freedom. The maxim of the institution is thus: one is either with us or against us; to be with us is holy; to be against us is heresy. Rally the masses in support of an ideal, a simulation of the truth, and their minds are forced *downward* into a *lower* state of consciousness, further away from the goal of enlightenment, and they will tread upon any identifiable heretical savages, impinging the will of the institution upon them at any cost. The brutality of Jesuit missionaries is one example.

Jung supports Baudrillard's description of simulation when he writes the following,

In the opinion of the man in the street, the "State," far more than any king in history, is the inexhaustible giver of all good; the "state" is invoked, made responsible, grumbled at, and so on and so forth. Society is elevated to the rank of a supreme ethical principle; indeed, it is even credited with positively creative

capacities. No one seems to notice that this worship of the word, which was necessary at a certain phase of man's mental development, has a perilous shadow side. That is to say, the moment the word, as a result of centuries of education, attains a universal validity, it severs its original connection with the divine Person. There is then a personified Church, a personified State; belief in the word becomes credulity, and the word itself an infernal slogan capable of any deception. (*Undiscovered* 42)

In digital terms, in the realm of ones and zeros, this credulity defines the herd as an array of passive zeros waiting for the institution, the one, to trigger their next action. As such, they hesitate to venture into the unknown, for it seems as if the realm of the spirit *is known*, and there is little reason to look beyond the institution for higher knowledge. In terms of the anthropoid, each individual is stifled as he suckles with the masses at a mechanized, depersonalized, institutionalized bosom, and he consumes the deception having no point of reference, no experiential contrary with which to supplant the vitiated "word." The major world religions are handed down prepackaged, and many followers never questions how the tenets and creeds and doctrines of these religions have evolved and how these religions may in fact work against individuation. The institution maintains the integrity of its vessel by grasping at doctrine or ritual or

“Truth” to secure its own buoyancy much like a crew scrambling to patch a sinking ship. When he discovers the façade, when he begins to recognize he is a slave, the mass man falls into a crisis of faith, and into the vast sea of uncertainty. This cycle functions in stark contrast to the vision quest, during which the individual, having learned of the territory, sets out to chart his own journey across those dark waters.

For the purpose of this writing, *syncretism* will refer not to a blending of cultures or societies but to a more neutral definition relevant to religion, what Maroney calls “borrowing,” and as such, “[s]yncretism occurs when one religion adopts, absorbs or otherwise accepts elements of another religion” (6).

However, individuals compose institutions, and individuals experience the clash of religious thought in a much more concrete manner than broad academic discussions of entire societies allow. Therefore the specific region of syncretistic manifestation discussed herein lies not in the larger institution of a religion but in the psychology of individual characters, for the institution becomes relevant in the mind of the individual and because “[a] million zeros joined together do not, unfortunately, add up to one. Ultimately everything depends on the quality of the individual” (Jung *Undiscovered* 31).

Considering individuals, though, becomes tedious and overwhelming as painting an image with one large brush stroke becomes more and more

impossible when one takes into account all the nuances of individual experience and the many possible interpretations of that experience. It is much easier to cast a wide stroke and separate large groups of people into statistical categories.

However, strategies of the statistician as an attempt to understand reality dehumanize a person and rob the individual of his or her particular experience.

It is also a strategy that ultimately perpetuates biases and justifies all the foul treatment heaped upon so many of the *other* throughout human history. Jung suggests that the “statistical method shows the facts in light of the ideal average but does not give us a picture of their empirical reality. While reflecting an indisputable aspect of reality, it can falsify the actual truth in a most misleading way” (*Undiscovered* 6), and so much of the literature on syncretism does mislead the reader into believing the statistical evidence that an entire society simply adapted neatly to religious pillaging by a colonizing force. Erdrich gives us reason to believe otherwise.

Because, as Lindenfeld notes, there exists a “relative paucity of theoretical models to help scholars make sense of large and disparate bodies of data concerning religious interaction” (“Varieties” 282), and in order to differentiate between *syncretism* — as it pertains to traditions and institutions — and the individual’s response to the convergence of belief systems, I am positing the term *syntheism*, for it suggests the blending of belief systems, and it is within the

individual psyche that this blending occurs. The experience of the individual gives us insight into the collective experience of a society, and although the “individuals” discussed herein are fictional characters, they nevertheless represent the interpretation of a syntheistic continuum catalogued and transcribed through their author. The first and secondhand accounts of the Anishinaabe experience given by Edrich reveal at least one perspective—albeit semi-historical, semi-autobiographical, and semi-fictional—indicative of the individual psychological states of various respondents to a religious fracturing.

I imagine syntheism as a continuum rather than as a fixed order of steps such as those of the grieving process. As such, *syntheism* denotes the cognitive blending of two or more religious belief systems by an individual and may be characterized by convergent or divergent religious beliefs, thoughts, or ideas and by syncretistic rituals, traditions, or practices with regard to worship. Syntheism most often manifests itself among colonized peoples, practicing a traditional religion, and their colonizers, imposing a more dominant religion. Furthermore, there seem to be ascertainable benchmarks along the continuum, areas toward which individuals more or less gravitate when belief systems collide.

One extreme of the continuum I am calling *syntheism of repudiation*, which is characterized by a complete rejection of the dominant religion for the sake of traditional religious beliefs. In Edrich’s novels, the character of Moses—and to

some degree that of Fleur—represents an individual exhibiting syntheism of repudiation, for he is aware that Catholicism exists on the reservation, but he refuses to acknowledge those religious beliefs in any manner.

On the other extreme rests *syntheism of renunciation*, which is characterized by an individual's rejection of his or her own traditional beliefs for the sake of a more dominant religion. The character of Pauline/Leopolda exhibits this extreme shift in beliefs. In addition, Pauline/Leopolda becomes most negatively affected in terms of her psychological well-being, so perhaps Erdrich is suggesting embracing Catholicism has induced a form of madness on the reservation.

Between the extremes lies a broad arena I have termed *syntheism of acquiescence*, which consists in tolerance or even acceptance of the dominant religion and a seemingly complete or partial or superficial adherence to rituals, traditions, or practices of the dominant religion while also retaining core aspects of the traditional religion. Think Marranism, in which adherents fully practiced neither Judaism nor Christianity, but paid homage to both in part. Lindenfeld describes a dual participation among the Lakota Sioux, who "did not merely participate as a matter of lip service, but took Christianity to heart. Yet, at the same time, they continued to perform their own religious ceremonies away from the eyes of the missionaries" ("Syncretism" 3-4). Marie Kashpaw, Pauline's

daughter, represents this form of syntheism, for she is at home among the Catholic fold Sunday mornings while also applying traditional beliefs and practices at her own discretion. Ruminating on a rosary, Marie tells the reader, "I don't pray. When I was young, I vowed I never would be caught begging God. [...] I go to church only to show the old hens they don't get me down. I don't pray, but sometimes I do touch the beads. It has become a secret" (LM 96). In *Tracks*, Marie rows across a stormy Lake Matchimanito with Nanapush, and she both brings an offering of tobacco for the Manitous and invokes the protection of "the Blessed Virgin and Her heart" (51). Marie more or less hedges her bets, and her response to a conflated religious environment represents a more common condition among later generations of colonized peoples. Moreover, because this type of syntheism coincides with the bulk of discussion in current research on syncretism, a discussion of the three outlying types of syntheism is more relevant to my thesis, for here the concern lies more with earlier generations of indigenous colonized individuals. Therefore, this category of syntheism is included as a matter of credence to relevant psychological responses to religious discord, but syntheism of acquiescence will not be discussed further.

Finally, as evinced by the character of Father Damien, a fourth manifestation of *syntheism of transcendence*, arises, characterized by a recognition

of universal truth extant among all religions and a willingness to accept and internalize elements of truth despite the originating doctrine or creed. Father Damien, for example, represents the consummation of a complete physical, emotional, and spiritual transformation, for we discover in *Last Report on Miracles at Little No Horse* that this character, whom the reader has known as Father throughout four previous novels, is in fact Agnes Dewitt, who later becomes Sister Cecilia and finally Father Damien. While dutifully observing liturgical practices, Father Damien, nevertheless incorporates Fleur's medicine into his daily routine, and he begins to allow increasingly more pagan or traditionalist influence as his years on the reservation slowly blend into one long, congruent experience. He becomes both Catholic and traditional, and his understanding and wisdom grow as he continues to bridge the gap between these two religious realms. What was once dogma for Father Damien becomes subjectivism, for he begins to recognize, "[t]he ordinary as well as esoteric forms of worship engaged in by the Ojibwe are sound, even compatible with the teachings of Christ" (Erdrich LR 49). The missionary has become the convert, the hunter the prey. In his analysis of religion as a psychological necessity, or at the very least as a process of psychological evolution, Jung describes what perhaps Father Damien has discovered:

[i]t is not ethical principles, however lofty, or creeds, however orthodox, that lay the foundations for the freedom and autonomy of the individual, but simply and solely the empirical awareness, the incontrovertible experience of an intensely personal, reciprocal relationship between man and an extramundane authority which acts as a counterpoise to the 'world' and its 'reason.' (*Undiscovered* 14)

Lindenfeld too suggests as one moves beyond the boundaries of orthodoxy, one can “embrace a belief in convergence of religious traditions: that different spirits and traditions are simply different manifestations of a single universal...Supreme Being” (“Syncretism” 4).

The framework of syntheism provides a schema in which Erdrich’s characters provide vicarious insight into the psychological experience of religious assault. Far from a reduction of Erdrich’s work to mere reflections of generations of resentment toward the Catholic Church, this schema expands the possibilities of her characters’ scope outside the literary and into the broader fields of psychology and cultural history. As Jung states, “the special significance of a true work of art resides in the fact that it has escaped from the limitations of the personal and has soared beyond the personal concerns of its creator” (*Spirit* 71), and within the schema of syntheism, Erdrich’s characters

discussed herein reveal complex human responses of individuals whose belief systems have become fragmented in the face of religious oppression.

CHAPTER II

MOSES: SYNTHESISM OF REPUDIATION

Major themes Louise Erdrich develops in her novels comprise cultural decimation and the resulting religious syncretism. Although much of their traditional religious practice has become diluted with Catholic doctrine, remnants of Anishinaabeg spiritual beliefs arise occasionally from the recesses of their collective memory, and one of Erdrich's more ethereal characters, Moses Pillager, represents the last remaining emblem of a tribal shamanic tradition, and his island home represents the last spiritual outpost of the tribe's ancestral psyche.

Anishinaabe mythology underlies much of the narrative in her novels, for Erdrich posits many of her characters as representatives of mythological figures. For example, through the brothers Nector and Eli, "Erdrich is reworking the familiar Native American motif of twins as complements and competitors" (Barry 125), so these "twins" intertwine the novels with creation stories that in turn preserve Anishinaabe society and culture. Each hero twin, according to legend, personifies either good or evil, and together they are the creators of the world as we know it. Thomas King recounts one example of a traditional

creation myth in which First Woman bears twins, “[a] boy and a girl. One light, one dark. One right-handed, one left-handed” (*Truth* 18), and as soon as they are born, these twins set about shaping the terra firma and all its flora and fauna, including humans. However, in Erdrich’s stories, Nector and Eli, as “twins,” are not so much creators as they are navigators. Each represents a different strategy for negotiating the space between past and future, the strata between Anishinaabe heritage and Western hegemony, the social conflict between reclaiming traditional beliefs and embracing transformational influences.

In addition to the twins, other mythological figures also arise in the novels. As a representative of the trickster figure, Gerry Nanapush functions as a dynamic resistive force that thwarts the persistent attempts of White society to restrain him. His mother, Lulu Lamartine, insists, “no white man has made a jail that could hold the son of Moses Pillager” (*LM* 285). Gerry is a notorious character who confronts White society on its own turf, so to speak. He is a maverick, creating havoc and challenging the authority of Whites in order to debunk the notion that Native Americans are happily accepting the fate Western culture has dealt them. Gerry, much like the old Indians in *King’s Green Grass*, *Running Water*, subverts the dominance that Whites impose on Native Americans, and he becomes a cultural hero among the other characters in the novels, for his active defiance reflects their own attitudes, as well as the attitude

of the Native American population at large. His trickster behavior is not the result of a purely personal choice, however, because Gerry's lineage suggests he is destined for this role; it is in his blood, so to speak. His mother is the daughter of Fleur Pillager who lived "with spirits," who "scorned the nuns," and who, above all else, "knew the medicines" (LM 101). Fleur recalls the traditions, the old ways, and Lulu, as part of her destiny as the daughter of a Pillager, has become a rather remarkable visionary by the end of *Love Medicine*, and others in their community consider her as knowledgeable as "an old-time traditional" (LM 363). Gerry's father, Moses Pillager, has also certainly passed along quite uncanny genetic influences. Even as a young boy, Moses was a survivor, one of the last two people of a family who had lived the old ways, who had courted spirits and conjured medicine, and who had haunted the woods of Pillager land after the clan's terrible demise. These were a people with a deep spiritual connection, so the son of Moses would, without question, possess mysterious inclination and insight.

Other more mysterious figures also survived the near deicide perpetuated by the Catholic Church, and despite their fragmented state, these remnants nevertheless represent powerful and tenacious forces occupying the minds of Erdrich's people and living vicariously through her characters. One such figure is the water monster, Michibizhii, lurking at the bottom of Lake Matchimanito,

the lake that occupies Pillager territory. This mythological beast is a version of the waterman who represents, according to Lawrence Gross, “one of the most powerful manitous in Anishinaabe culture” (51). When embarking on a vision quest, “children are especially advised to reject any offer of help from water creatures in general and Michibizhii in particular” (Gross 52), for this creature is most dangerous and cunning. Michibizhii waits in the depths of murky water to drown his victims, yet in spite of his treacherous deeds this god could be appeased with gifts and prayers, and as we read in Erdrich’s work, he would even protect those in whom he found favor. It is little wonder that such a powerful mythological figure survived despite centuries of attack. As Erdrich describes him in *Tracks*, his figure represents a symbol of transcendence, so, much like the Alchemist’s serpent or the Christian’s fish, he encompasses the central figure of the chthonic realm; he is the master of the depths, with whom Fleur Pillager and her cousin Moses share an intimacy that frightens others on the reservation.

Moses Pillager shares a similar history with the Old Testament Moses, for, like his namesake, his character both exemplifies a version of the lost child motif and, as an adult, nurtures an uncanny relationship with his god, Michibizhii. The Moses of the Bible was exiled by his family in order to save his life; he developed a strong relationship with God; and he later became the last spiritual

connection to God, the last hope of his people who had become lost in the desert of their own indecision. Likewise, Moses Pillager experiences a form of exile when, in order to save him from illness and death, Nanapush instructs his family to pretend he has already died. His parents build a grave house, laying his clothes upon the grave, and they make offerings at his gravesite so as to fool the spirit that makes the family terminally ill. They put his clothes on backward and began referring to him as Moses, so the spirit of sickness would think “the small boy who lived was someone else” (T 35-6). And, finally, they begin to talk past the boy, ignoring his presence as if he is truly gone, as if he is invisible. This lost child motif suggests Moses, as a metaphor for his tribe, has lost his connection with his origins. He attempted to reestablish this vital link when he “took the charcoal from his mother’s hand...[and] blackened his face and fasted for visions until he grew gaunt, but he found no answer” (T 36). In this passage we see the child trying to make sense of his abandonment, yet after unsuccessful attempts to reconnect with his former identity, he finally moves away, moves out to the island alone, where as Nanapush tells Lulu, “[Moses] gained protection from the water man [Michibizhii], the lion in the lake” (T 36). This event parallels the tribe’s treatment of their former religious beliefs. The people tried to disguise their own religion as Catholicism spread, but at last, their inattention to the old gods caused these deities to slip away from them, to pass into the deep waters of

unconsciousness. Moses lives alone and nearly forgotten on the island, existing almost as a memory in others' minds, yet now and then some covertly visit his lonely outpost to have him contrive medicines and invoke spirits in the old way. Although the Catholic Church dominates their daily religious practices, some of the residents remain tenuously connected through an acquiescent syntheism to their ancestral beliefs, and they maintain this connection through a secret relationship with Moses.

For all the subtlety with which Erdrich treats Moses, his character is no doubt one of the more powerful on the reservation. He is the shaman, and he embodies a syntheism of repudiation, holding fast to traditional ways. Despite what we might consider his idiosyncrasies, he is nevertheless a courageous explorer of the spiritual realm, and he is master of the traditional medicine that sustained Erdrich's people for centuries. His is a character who embodies traditional religious beliefs in direct opposition to Western influence, so, as in his childhood, his isolation ensures his survival and sustains his significance as a spiritual link to the past.

His island home, isolated from the village and even from his family's property, affords Moses the solitude that he must maintain in order to continue nurturing his kinship with the old gods. When writing on isolation, Mark Conliffe notes, "Despite the fact that I am alone, my activities in isolation will be

conditioned by what I know, by what I take from my past or my roots, not just by my present surroundings. This spatial detachment at once marks the part as separate, but does not eliminate the fact that it shared common ground with the whole" (119). Moses lives as a hermit in his cave, as a devotee to the world of the interior, to the gods themselves. He shuns corporeality, and all his energy becomes focused on the spirit world, that "other place, boundless, where the dead sit talking, see too much, and regard the living as fools" (T 8). Gaston Bachelard writes of the hermit's hut as an image that stirs within us deep recollections of our own call to isolation and devotion. As we encounter the hut in literature, it "immediately becomes centralized solitude, for in the land of legend, there exists no adjoining hut....The image leads us on towards extreme solitude. The hermit is *alone* before God. His hut, therefore, is just the opposite of the monastery. And there radiates about this centralized solitude a universe of meditation and prayer, a universe outside the universe" (32). Moses exists at the threshold between these two realities, a psychologically tenuous position to be sure. Yet as Moses practices his shamanic medicine in isolation, he remains spiritually and somewhat socially connected to his people, and so, for the tribe at large, he represents an emblematic connection to their religious traditions.

The spiritual vigil that he keeps, however, carries a heavy price, for Moses has little opportunity to reconcile with his conflicted consciousness. He is, after

all, not merely familiar with the contents of the unconscious mind, with the spirit world, he is altogether consumed, nearly drowned in the murky depths of the chthonic realm. He risks becoming completely lost, at which point the tragedy becomes twofold, for the ancestral spirits lose a means of expressing themselves in corporeality, and the tribe loses a vital connection to the healing waters of the gods. With *Love Medicine*, Erdrich provides a catalyst through which Moses is saved, for Lulu becomes the bridge between these two realities, and her union with Moses ensures the spiritual future of her people will remain connected to their religious past.

When Lulu first encounters Moses, he is, essentially, rather insane. He still imagines himself as invisible, and he has difficulty determining the nature of Lulu, for one imagines he sees her as perhaps another apparition, one of the many spirits who visit him. Lulu describes his behavior at their first meeting, as he takes from his cave a small mirror, “and put[s] it before [her] face. Quickly, lightly, he stepped behind [her] and checked both [their] images at once” (*LM* 78). After determining her physicality and assuring himself she is really there, he offers her tea and sits down with her. Like the hermit lost in his visions, or like the madman lost in his fantasies, Moses has difficulty differentiating numinous phantasms from actual people. He has suffered as a result of his isolation from the social sphere so that his shamanism has become somewhat one-sided. No

longer is he the well-balanced medicine man of old, for his coordination of the two realities has atrophied into a clumsy social maladaptation coupled with an overwhelming spiritual influx. By modern Western psychiatric standards, Moses has slipped into schizophrenia. Based on the root, *schism*, this (supposed) mental disorder suggests one has lost rational contact with one's environment, and the medical and psychiatric communities insist that this deviation from the (arbitrary) norm constitutes illness. However, some suggest that pure rationality is the true insanity and that the purely rational mind suffers delusions of sanity. In *The Politics of Schizophrenia: Psychiatric Oppression in the United States*, David Hill presents evidence to suggest that the schizophrenic is no less lucid than the so-called normal person, and in fact may be more completely human in his experience than other, more "sane" persons. The distinction between sanity and insanity is, in his opinion, arbitrary, and this "diagnosis" has arisen as a means to safeguard the social majority and its economic production (Hill 66). One recalls the film, *The Matrix*, in which, symbolically, the social majority, through the imposition of a dream world, is kept blind to its imprisonment within the hegemony and, as such, convinced of its freedom. With this image in mind, one may suggest that Moses has traded one dream world for another, yet in doing so he has positioned himself too far to one side and has lost his balance. Lulu acts to restore his balance, for by degrees she brings him back to the physical world.

Lulu draws Moses back into the circle of life with her touch. She breaks his extreme isolation and reconciles his childhood desertion, for as she describes, “[w]hen I cupped his face carefully in my palms, as though he were a child, he fell toward me with a deep, sad sound” (*LM* 80). She further explains, “I turned him to the front with my gaze, put his clothes on right. I pulled him into the circle of my arms the way a mother encourages her child to walk. Touch by touch, I took down his gravehouse. With my kisses, I placed food for living people between his lips” (*LM* 82). Lulu brings Moses out of the darkness of the spirit world and into the light of the living, and by this act she restores her ancestral tradition and prevents a tribal loss of soul. Although Moses and the other mythological figures in Erdrich’s novels represent the tenacity of the Anishinaabe spiritual tradition, Lulu embodies the tenacity of the Anishinaabe people in general, and she represents the dynamism with which her people continue to survive despite overwhelming destructive forces that plague their society and culture.

On the other hand, despite his tenuous spiritual connection with the tribe, Moses as an individual remains cut off from society at large as a result of his repudiation. He has held fast to traditional ways and necessarily become a rigid fixture frozen in time and limited in scope, and his failure to rise above the

religious fray has condemned Moses to a life of social isolation and spiritual obscurity.

As a means of retaining what is familiar, a syntheism of repudiation functions too as a form of denial. In the context of deicide, an assault on one's belief system may in fact arouse the grieving process, which begins with denial of the loss, and by avoiding a healthy, albeit emotionally painful, progression through the entire grieving process, an individual continues to suffer psychologically. Moses remains fixed in a state of denial, and therefore he limits his effectiveness in the shifting religious context, and as the hands of time (and the novels) progress, he becomes ever more obsolete.

It would seem, however, that Moses fails to *synthesize* the two belief systems and that *synthesis* and *repudiation* are diametrically opposed terms, yet there does exist a response to the extrinsic forces, and Moses isolates himself on his island because these forces arise. His choice to remain disengaged from the tribe at large is one that works against Moses and against the wellbeing of his people. Likewise, the term *repudiation* works against the synthesizing of belief but also functions to expose an irreconcilable tension present in a syntheism of repudiation. Moses simply cannot ignore the presence of Catholicism on the reservation and all that presence entails, and the terminology here reflects that discord.

CHAPTER III

PAULINE/LEOPOLDA: SYNTHEISM OF RENUNCIATION

Unfortunately, Anishinaabe society encounters destructive forces not only extrinsically but also intrinsically, for the tribal soul is further threatened by a corrosive element represented in the character of Pauline/Leopolda. Pauline Puyat believes that by embracing the dominant white society she may “be like [her] mother, who showed her half-white” or “like [her] grandfather, pure Canadian” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 14). As she transforms herself into the nun, Leopolda, she believes that by immersing herself into Catholicism she may help God cast out the “devil” that hinders her people’s full conversion to Christendom (11). Her character casts the shadow of a religious schism that develops among those succumbing to the hegemonic pressures of a more dominant religion, those for whom exile is impractical or impossible and so must concede to the Papal ultimatum to convert or else. This schism becomes evident as her story progresses through the novels and as her identity and her behavior shift from an adolescent rejection of her family to a complete self-denial. Her duplicitous character embodies a syntheism of renunciation, for as Pauline, she shuns her heritage and seeks to separate herself from her own Indianess, and

later as Leopolda, she projects her self-hatred onto others of the reservation and so keeps “track of [Satan] and [knows] his habits, minds he burrowed into,” specifically the minds of Anishinaabe children and particularly Marie Lazarre, who is in fact her illegitimate daughter (*LM* 45). In the words of Ben Kingsley’s Mohandas K. Gandhi character, “the only devils in the world are those running round in our own hearts, and that is where all our battles ought to be fought” (*Gandhi*), yet Leopolda never seeks to identify the devil in her own heart, the devil she created out of her hatred for all things Anishinaabe, especially herself. Pauline’s denial of her people and Leopolda’s projection of her own self-hatred, her seeing in others the evil she cannot accept in herself, set in motion a series of events that suggests despite her efforts, her heritage has not forgotten *her*, for her origins come round time and again to meet her head-on.

As one of the many characters adrift in the liminal space between two cultures and awash with syncretistic tension, Pauline grasps desperately for the landfall of her identity. She is neither quite white enough nor quite Indian enough, for her social and physical awkwardness and her mixed-blood genetics forestall her acceptance by either society. Her identity crisis begins in her childhood, for she remarks, “even as a child I saw that to hang back was to perish. I saw through the eyes of the world outside of us. I would not speak our language” (*T* 14). As Susan Stanford Friedman suggests of Pauline,

“[p]erformatively exposing the self-hatred of the colonized subject” (112), she believes the hegemonic stereotype that those on the reservation are uncivilized and that she was “made for better” (T 14). Pauline willingly devours this deception, never recognizing that she is in fact another victim, that the government has “stuffed the English language in [her] mouth” (LM 326), and because she is blinded by the promise of rebirth in the afterlife, she attempts to leave her heritage behind like “a crumbling skin” (T 205).

Pauline leaves the reservation in pursuit of her “whiteness” and travels to Argus in order to “learn the lace-making trade from the nuns” (T 14). Lace is of course white, intricate, and delicate, and Pauline seems to imagine reshaping herself this way, but perhaps she has not remembered that often lace is found along the fringes of finer material. She wishes to lace for herself a new white identity, which Friedman, summarizing Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Mask*, notes among colonized people is the result of a “racial neurosis and psychopathology. This colonization of the mind produces a desire—often expressed symptomatically—to be white as a response to the racist imperative to ‘turn white or disappear’” (112). Lindenfeld makes a similar argument regarding the Sioux and their experiences of “cultural genocide,” and he cites the Native scholar George Tinker, who writes the following:

the process of Christianization has involved some internalization of the larger illusion of Indian inferiority and the idealization of white culture and religion...[which] surely results in a praxis of self-hatred....Just as an abused child slowly but inevitably internalizes a parent's abuse as a consistent demonstration of the child's own shortcomings. (qtd. in "Varieties" 287)

Pauline has succumbed to this cultural abuse and has turned full force against her own heritage and against her people and against herself.

Instead of hooking fine lace, Pauline finds herself sweeping dusty floors in a butcher shop, in a place consumed by death and filled with hooked flesh. While there, she begins to feel the first pangs of rejection, for as Nanapush says, "she was unnoticeable, homely if it must be said" (*T* 39), and the men who patronize the meat market barely notice her. As far as the whites are concerned, Pauline does indeed "fade out" as her father warns (14). So much so that she "tried to stop [herself] from remembering what it was like to have companions, to have [her] mother and sisters around [her]" (15). Pauline seeks to distance herself from her heritage and to find acceptance among the whites, but her social awkwardness, her lack of confidence, and her uncomely features—and surely her evident indianness—prevent her assimilation. She realizes too she will find no female companions there in Argus either, for she "hardly rinsed through the

white girls' thoughts" (15). Because she believes that "to hang back [is] to perish," Pauline shuns the reservation and seeks to weave for herself a new self image, but among the whites she encounters only rejection, and she remains relegated to the fringe.

That winter a sickness sweeps across the reservation, and Pauline's mother and sisters, among many others, perish (*T* 15). She is at this time completely cut off from her family and home, and Pauline receives the severing of ties she seeks. However, when Fleur arrives in Argus, Pauline's behavior suggests she in fact longs to maintain some sort of connection to her heritage, for she begins to cling to Fleur because, perhaps as representative of a strong, matriarchal figure on the reservation and a bastion of tradition, Fleur reminds her of home. Awash in uncertainty and tossed about by her own naïve understanding of the socio-religious atmosphere, Pauline seems to be grasping for a savior or for a mother, someone unto whom she can submit and at last find solid ground, so to speak, on which to stand. Initially she looks to Fleur as her surrogate. However, Fleur too ignores Pauline, for she tells Nanapush, "the Puyat lies" (38). Pauline's deceit is renowned among those of Fleur's circle, and they therefore "tried to ignore her," because she "schemed to gain attention by telling odd tales that created damage" (39). Pauline is desperate for acceptance from the very people she attempts to reject.

During a long poker game at the butcher shop, Pauline falls asleep in a “mound of swept sawdust,” and she later awakens as she is “lifted, soothed, cradled in a woman’s arms and rocked so quiet that [she] kept [her] eyes shut while Fleur rolled” her into a quieter resting place atop old ledgers in a closet (T 20). Because Fleur even briefly attends to her as a mother would, Pauline, although a teenager, responds as a child. Later in the narrative, as Pauline begins to wear the habit and assume her identity as a Catholic nun, she again encounters this mothering from Fleur. Pauline arrives at Fleur’s during a long winter having not bathed in quite awhile, as one of her many masochistic penances, and Fleur runs a bath for her. Fleur and Lulu proceed to bathe Pauline, and she tells the reader, “I gave myself up then, closed my eyes and decided not to question Fleur’s habit of sudden tenderness. It was like that night she carried me to Fritzie’s closet and lay me among the ledgers. I gave in” (154). Pauline aches for a mother’s affection, yet because she cannot have this puerile need fully satisfied, she resents the entirety of her people, finding instead a figurative mother in the Virgin Mary.

In her analysis of *Love Medicine*, Karla Sanders suggests Pauline is “attracted to Catholicism because of the Virgin Mary” (133), for as Maroney suggest “saint veneration is a major route for syncretism” (166). For Pauline, Mary is the catalyst that sets in motion her transformation into the aberrant

abbess. Because of her need for a mother figure in her life, Pauline naturally latches onto the supreme mother, the Virgin Mary, who in Jungian terms symbolizes the Great Mother archetype, of which there are two aspects: the good and nurturing mother and the terrible, devouring mother (*Archetypes* 82). At one point in her religious evolution, kneeling before Her statue in feigned postulancy, Pauline describes in great detail the Virgin Mary, yet she remains more attuned to Her physical features than to the loving and nurturing aspects the Virgin Mother symbolizes (*T* 94), for Pauline is more concerned with appearances. Growing up a homely girl, she accepts not her God-given humility and develops not an intestinal fortitude worthy of her ancestry, but she instead becomes narcissistic and develops delusions of grandeur as God's Navy Seal on a covert mission to oust evil on the reservation. Although in other parts of her narrative she reflects on the good nature of the Virgin and the significance of Her life-giving qualities, Pauline nevertheless identifies herself as an active agent of God, identifies with a more or less masculine role, and so she begins a slow transformation into what Nanapush describes as the "crow of the reservation" (*T* 54), the harbinger of death. Because, as Jung writes, "death is quite commonly regarded as an entry into the mother's womb" (*Symbols* 238), the crow or the "vulture" (Erdrich *FS* 100), and its capacity as a carrion devourer, connotes an evil "mother significance" (Jung *Symbols* 238). As Pauline becomes better and

better at “easing souls into death” (*T* 57) through her work as a more or less door-to-door mortician, she seals her fate as a “scavenger” (189), and she furthermore comes to believe death will pass her over “just as men did,” and she will “live a long, strict life” (75). Pauline not only rejects the nurturing capacity of her heritage but also rejects the nurturing capacity in herself, and she rejects her own sexuality and therefore too her life-giving capacity. As Nanapush tells us, she is “afraid of life in fact, afraid of birth” (57), and she therefore becomes the antithesis of Mary.

Pauline is a murderer. With her character, Erdrich makes it very clear that she sees the Catholic Church as having devastated her people ever since “those first priests who came to steal Ojibwe souls” (*FS* 5). Pauline’s first murders take place in Argus when she traps the perpetrators of Fleur’s sexual assault in the meat locker. Michelle Hessler suggests Pauline murders these men “to soothe a troubled conscience” because she had refrained “from assisting Fleur as the three butcher shop assistants—Lily, Tor, and Dutch James—raped her in retaliation for losing a high-stakes poker game” (41). However, one may also conclude Pauline murdered these men because they, in essence, chose Fleur over her. Perhaps she murders them out of jealousy because “Fleur’s stunning physical beauty readily attracts men—even white men—[and] Pauline...considers her companion a rival” (Hessler 41). Much like a displaced Electra complex, Pauline battles for the

favor of God (the father), and she sees Fleur—and all her “old time traditional” affiliates (*LM* 363)—as the embodiment of a powerful mother whose undeniable spiritual gifts threaten her chances for victory. She is willing to kill, or at least willing to withhold vital aid, in order to conquer what she begins to project as “the devil.”

During the birth of Lulu, Fleur’s daughter, Pauline is present, for she cannot resist her obsession with Fleur and as part of her “mission” interjects herself among Fleur and her cohorts whenever possible (*T* 141). As Fleur suffers through a trying transitional labor for two days, she finally reaches a critical moment, “and then, it was as if the Manitous all through the woods spoke through Fleur...[and] perhaps the bear heard Fleur calling, and answered” (*T* 59). A drunken bear stumbles “into the beaten grass of Fleur’s yard” (58) and then makes its way into the cabin where Fleur lies in labor. The bear frightens Fleur so much so that she raises herself “on the mound of blankets and [gives] birth” (60). Nanapush tells the reader that, then “Pauline took down the gun and shot point-blank, filling the bear’s heart. She says so anyway. But she says that the lead only gave the bear strength, and I’ll support that...[for] it could have been a spirit bear” (60). Pauline saves them by shooting the bear. However, the bear is synonymous with Fleur, for according to “Ojibwa ontology and the concept of ‘soul dualism,’ each person possesses two souls which can

metamorphize into other animate objects as they travel,” and Fleur’s soul, because “the Pillager’s clan marker consists of four crosshatched bears...transforms into a bear” (Hessler 41-2). Legend has it that Fleur traveled at night in the form of a bear, for Pauline tells the reader, “we followed the tracks of her bare feet and saw where they changed, where the claws sprang out, the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt...we heard her chuffing cough, the bear cough” (*T* 12). Therefore, Pauline’s shooting of this bear, this spirit bear, represents her figurative attempt at killing a symbol of the traditional religion and thereby also killing an aspect of Fleur and her spiritual influence in Pauline’s effort to “save” her. Like the Jesuits before her, Pauline is “killing them with belief” (*LM* 45).

Pauline, however, is willing not only to perpetrate symbolic murder but also to commit actual murder. According to Catholic doctrine, abortion is akin to murder, yet when Pauline discovers she is pregnant with Napoleon’s child, she first denies herself food, nourishment for the fetus, then attempts to push “the handle of an axe against [her] stomach” in an effort to terminate her pregnancy (*T* 131). She considers cinching her stomach with ropes or jumping off the roof in order to end the life inside of her, for she believes the child is the product of sin, the result of Satanic influence (132-3). She even tries to clench “around [her] child so that she could not escape” while in the throes of labor (135), but

Bernadette restrains Pauline and fashions forceps out of iron spoons in order to deliver the baby, Marie, into the world. Pauline resists every nurturing and loving instinct of a mother, and she chooses instead to become the evil, devouring mother figure, the agent of evil and death in the guise of a nun.

Traditional religion consists in not only spiritual health but also physical health in the form of traditional medicines and herbs, yet Pauline carries with her a spiritual sickness that proves too tenacious for even one as strong as Fleur. After helping Pauline bathe, Fleur begins the miscarriage of her second child, so she asks Pauline to fetch from the storage shed certain herbs that will stop the bleeding. However, Pauline feebly attempts to gather the herbs and then sits idly by fascinated more with Fleur's suffering than dedicated to her health. Lulu, still a young child, has to run through the frozen woods to find help for her mother, for Pauline proves "useless" in this situation either by disregard of her tradition, by her own morbid design, or perhaps, as she intimates, by divine will (T 157). Pauline sits "paralyzed" watching Fleur dying despite "all the prayers [she] had lifted" (158), for she assumes that one may disentangle oneself from active responsibility by appealing to God through inert prayer. Her passivity and her ineptitude cause the death of Fleur's baby and nearly allow Fleur's death as well, if not for Margaret's intervention in the last hour.

Toward the end of *Tracks*, Pauline's spiritual sickness seems to progress to nearly complete mental illness, for she sees Napoleon near Lake Matchimanito and, in a hallucinatory fit, she murders him. She perceives Napoleon as the devil incarnate, rising from the lake, and fashions her rosary into a noose and strangles him to death. Pauline tells the reader, "I...pushed him down into the sand and then fell upon him and devoured him, scattered myself in all directions, stupefied my own brain in the process so thoroughly that the only things left of intelligence were my doubled-over hands" (202). She loses her mind in a fit of panic and kills the father of her child, yet Pauline convinces herself she "had committed no sin. There was no guilt in this matter, no fault. How could I have known what body the devil would assume?" (203). With this act, Pauline completes her transformation from a confused girl into a hardened and soulless imposter among cloistered nuns. She changes her name, leaves "Pauline behind" and utters the syllables, "Leopolda," and the sounds "cracked in [her] ears like a fist through ice" (205). Ironically, in the guise of a Catholic nun, Leopolda comes to employ the "dark mind of the savage" against her own people (LR 36).

For all this, her schism represents a mindset that is most dangerous, for rather than separate from the traditional religion altogether, Pauline remains on the reservation as an insipid and disjointed amalgam of traditionalist half-truths and fundamentalist narrowness. Like Moses, Pauline is estranged from her

family and forced to confront reality on her own, yet Moses, the introvert, turns inward to find guidance in the deeper waters of his past, while Pauline represses her ancestry and seeks solace in a sprinkling of Catholicism to shroud her vengeance and hatred.

Pauline has renounced her traditional religion and developed a syntheism that projects onto her own people the identity of her spiritual enemy to be overcome. Her decision has left Pauline, like Moses, a stranger among her family, but she is also a stranger among the whites. Confronted with the onslaught of religious ambiguity, Pauline chooses to identify with the hegemony, and in doing so she reflects an anecdote of the baptized Indian in John Tanner's narrative. Tanner had been captured by the Anishinaabe as a child and lived among them well into his adulthood. The story of Tanner's captivity is recounted in his autobiographical narrative, *The Falcon*, and Erdrich cites his book as "a family touchstone" and inspiration (xi). An old Indian, Wah-ka-zhe, tells Tanner the story of a baptized Indian:

who, after death, went to the gate of the white man's heaven, and demanded admittance; but the man who kept watch at the gate told him no redskins could be allowed to enter there. 'Go,' said he, 'for to the west there are the villages and the hunting grounds of those of your own people who have been on the earth before you.' So he

departed thence, but when he came to the villages where the dead of his own people resided, the chief refused him admittance. 'You have been ashamed of us while you lived. You have chosen to worship the white man's God. Go now to his village, and let him provide for you.' Thus he was rejected by both parties. (Tanner 162)

If a syntheism of repudiation corresponds to a stage of grieving, then a syntheism of renunciation represents the more heinous act of murder. One is not grieving the loss of one's deities but instead holding the gods under water. Pauline not only attempts to kill the traditional gods but also commits actual murder in her projecting all that she has grown to hate about herself onto others, and in so doing, she has identified with evil. The temptation to adopt a syntheism of renunciation consists in a cowardly sense of self-preservation, which ironically results in a loss of self and a loss of soul. Pauline's native heritage is a part of her she cannot literally deny, but she rationalizes her way into believing she can, and by doing so, she becomes socially and emotionally isolated, and because she murders the gods, so to speak, Pauline in turn comes to embody evil, for in the context of Erdrich's fictional world a syntheism of renunciation results in a state of godlessness.

CHAPTER IV

FATHER DAMIEN: SYNTHEISM OF TRANSCENDENCE

This is my commandment, that you love

one another as I have loved you.

Greater love has no one than this,

than to lay down one's life for his friends. (John 15.13)

One could hardly imagine a more complicated character than the triune Agnes DeWitt/Sister Cecelia/Father Damien Modeste, but for the sake of clarity and readability, and because my topic lends itself more precisely to a discussion of the latter third of this character, I will refer to him simply as Father Damien and will also use the masculine pronoun. However, a brief synopsis of Damien's evolution precedes the discussion in order to establish the nature of this multifaceted character.

Throughout the four earlier novels, the reader is familiar with this character only as Father Damien, so it comes as quite a surprise in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* to discover he is actually a woman. Jung notes in *The Red Book*, "[a]s a man you have no soul, since it is in the woman; as a woman

you have no soul, since it is in the man. But if you become a human being, then your soul comes to you" (264). Here Jung suggests one find the opposite in oneself in order to achieve full human capacity; otherwise, "[i]f you remain within arbitrary and artificially created boundaries, you walk as between two high walls: you do not see the immensity of the world" (264). Father Damien has assumed the role of the opposite and therefore creates a synthesis, a union of body and soul, and his capacity for seeing the immensity of the world becomes evident as the novel progresses.

In the exposition of *Last Report*, the reader learns Sister Cecelia grew up Agnes DeWitt in rural Minnesota but changed her name upon joining a cloister of nuns. While there she taught music, piano specifically, and when she was unoccupied with teaching, Sister Cecelia played. She played Brahms, Debussy, Bach, Shubert, and Beethoven, and all these she played with appreciation and reverence for these masters; however, "when it came to the Chopin...her playing was of the utmost sincerity. And Chopin, played simply, devastates the heart" (LR 14). The Mother Superior began to take issue with Sister Cecelia's playing, for the other Sisters were so moved emotionally that "a pause between the piercing sorrows of minor notes made a sister scrubbing the floor weep into the bucket where she dipped her rag so that the convent's boards, washed in tears, seemed to creak now in human tongue" (14). Soon after, the young nun

“dismantled her habit” and left the convent “stripped down to her shift” (16).

Agnes “walked away from the convent...and [from] the music, her music, which the Mother Superior would keep from then on under lock and key as capable of mayhem” (17).

Agnes wanders onto the farm of Berndt Vogel, a simple man, a veteran, who purchased his farm with the sweat of his brow. When he sees Agnes in that sheer muslin shift standing barefoot in his yard, it is all up for Berndt. He is smitten. After feeding her, Berndt gives Agnes his bed, and he sleeps in the barn, and this sleeping arrangement continues for quite some time. Agnes eventually asks Berndt for a piano, and he agrees to purchase it for her, but asks for her hand in marriage in return. She refuses. He buys the piano anyway. And not long afterward the two of them, rapt in the bliss of musical ecstasy, consummate their relationship in mutual harmony.

Their relationship flourishes for a time, but a turn of fate divides the couple when a notorious bank robber kidnaps Agnes, and Berndt rides to her rescue only to be fatally wounded in his attempt to save her. Agnes is once again alone, and she suffers tremendous grief at the loss of Berndt. The townspeople worry that Agnes has lost her mind a bit, and even her music students tell stories of Agnes’s strange behavior in dealing with her sorrow. So much so, that when Agnes misses church one Sunday, a visiting priest, Father Damien Modeste (the

first), makes a trip out to see her. During their conversation, he tells Agnes he is going north to the reservation to serve as the new priest there, as the former Father had passed on as a result of illness. Soon after this meeting, the river swells and a great flood takes Agnes's farm and her blessed piano. In shock, Agnes again wanders away from her home, and along her way she finds the priest hanging from a tree, drowned in the great flood. Agnes takes his clothes and begins the journey north in the guise of Father Damien Modeste.

As a woman, Agnes apparently searches for her identity, first as a nun, then as a wife, and this search leads her to sorrow and loss. She finally assumes the identity of a man and at last discovers her calling, for she becomes the perfect blend of womanly nurturing and manly stubbornness in her role as Father Damien. Even her identity suggests a penchant for seeing beyond the arbitrary boundaries of gender long before she becomes the old wise man on the reservation, and she therefore possesses the mindset necessary for transcending the hindrances of religious dogma and seeing instead the truth in all its vicissitudes and plurality.

Having met in the past people whose spirits are quite obviously well tuned, for their mere presence affects a calming energy in a room, one imagines the nature of Father Damien much the same way. Although, like Leopolda, he too is an impostor, Father Damien nevertheless rises to the higher calling of his

office with a genuine loving, nurturing, and selfless spirit, and he maintains “a neutral, kind, meditative watchfulness that had in it no hint of impatience” (*LR* 82). From his experience of both the flutter of highest joy and the pangs of deepest sorrow, he has developed an inner vision that shapes his outlook. Father Damien sees the divine in all its vicissitudes, for he engenders Maroney’s description of “men of superior religious gifts [who] reach identical conclusions about divine matters because divine matters are fixed and stable across cultural boundaries, despite the shifting contexts” (183). It is this acute vision that fosters in Father Damien a syntheism of transcendence, by which he earns the respect and admiration of both the nuns in the convent (excluding Leopolda) and the traditionalists on the reservation such that “[h]e was welcome where no other white man was allowed” (*LR* 276).

His first crucial act as priest unfolds as Father Damien sets out to visit Nanapush. After an arduous journey through deep snow, he arrives at the cabin only to confront a bevy of resistance in the form of spirits whose intent seems to be dissuading his interference, for Nanapush and Fleur are inside the cabin and lingering at the threshold of starvation and death. This “mutter of presences, rustling and arguing on all sides...crushed toward” the priest, and only one sensitive and attuned to matters of the spirit would pass through a doorway so closely guarded as this (*LR* 79). Father Damien finds the “two beings, hollow

and strange" (79), clinging to their last moments on Earth, yet "the girl and the old man were annoyed," for "some of the dead came back and waited outside the door, urging them to follow...and just as they had weakened and slid into a state somewhere between death and life...here came this priest" (80). Father Damien draws them back among the living, in essence restoring the religious balance on the reservation in much the same way Lulu did with Moses. Despite his affiliation with and devotion to a Christian God, Father Damien suggests "gods are not required to be consistent—in fact, gods aren't required to be anything at all. There are no requirements for gods" (239), and in this vein he eventually recognizes religious principles as guidelines relative to a cultural perspective. He employs an interpretive strategy that resists a myopic and dogmatic implementation of Christian values and instead adopts a more universal recognition of truth, for his "bedrock [becomes] aggregate" (266), and he "was exploring worlds inhabited by both Ojibwe and Catholic" (211).

Although Fleur describes the white man's god as greedily gathering up Annishinaabeg spirits, which may appear to be the case given the behavior of previous "black robes" (LR 81), Father Damien displays a different purpose, for when Kashpaw asks, "what makes you walk behind this Jesus?" he answers, "it is love...that is the sole reason. Love" (99). And it is this kind of love, this *agape*, this selfless love, that is difficult not only for Kashpaw and his clan to accept in a

white man but also for most missionaries of Christendom to fully materialize or even internalize. Father Damien, on the other hand, does exhibit a capacity for this kind of love, and thus he gives himself up to the physical and spiritual needs of his flock, even if that means reinterpreting Catholic doctrine. In a letter to the Pope regarding his flock, Father Damien tells him, “the closer I draw, the more of their pain do I feel” (209), and in order to better understand their emotional pain, he also enmeshes himself further into their religious practices, the means by which they attempt to quell that pain.

Marie Kashpaw tells the reader Fleur “was living back there with no lights, she was living with spirits.... [n]ow she wore hide slippers, moccasins, let her braids grow long, traveled to town on foot...visited the priest. She made no confession, though some said Father Damien Modeste confessed his sins to her” (LM 101). While Moses remains on his island throughout the novels, only visiting town now and again for provisions, Fleur inhabits Pillager land on *this* side of the dark Matchimanito waters. She maintains her connection with the rest of the reservation more closely than does Moses, yet she nevertheless limits her contact with the outside world as much as feasible. Fleur survives in the old ways, yet she also recognizes the need for selective compliance with the hegemonic society at large, for she knows the traditional medicines and practices these arts, and she uses this knowledge to manipulate white society whenever

necessary. Fleur represents, in the truest sense, the shaman, the master of two worlds, and her respect for Father Damien derives from his similar practice of selective compliance with the dominant religion, and, as time passes, Father Damien “practiced a mixture of faiths, kept the pipe, translated hymns or brought in the drum, and had placed in the nave of his church a statue of the Virgin—solid, dark, kind eyed, hideous, and gentle” (LR 276). Father Damien’s syntheism seems in part a type of conversion, “a change in sensibility that occurs within an individual” (Lindenfeld “Varieties” 282), but his practices transcend mere ritual and instead exhibit an effort to answer the question, “are we loved” (227). In his sermon to the snakes, Father Damien tells the serpents, “Like you, I poise alertly and open my senses to try to read the air, the clouds, the sun’s slant, the little movements of the animals, all in the hope I will learn the secret of whether I am loved” (227).

Perhaps because, as she does with Fleur, she develops his character as religiously far-sighted, Erdrich extols Father Damien as saintly, the best possible representative of Catholicism on the reservation. Father Damien sees beyond the dogma, beyond the ritual, to the heart of religion as a means to an end, a means by which one reaches a higher mode of being, and he recognizes the subjectivity of the means to this end. For example, Father Jude, a young priest who goes to the reservation to interview him, questions Father Damien about “immoral”

relationships (LR 135). When Damien tells Father Jude he cherishes those relationships the way he looks “fondly upon a child’s exuberant compulsion to play,” Father Jude suggests his principles have become “diluted” (134), and he insists that “certain norms of behavior are taken for granted. Right. Wrong. These are simply distinguished. Black is black and white is white” (135). Father Damien remarks, the “mixture is gray...I’ve never seen the truth...without crossing my eyes. Life is crazy” (135). Here, Father Damien expresses his sincere love for his flock and the extent of his patience with and his understanding of them, and he also hints at his appreciation of their religious beliefs. This appreciation has been fostered by the intimacy of his experiences with those of his parish and also by the visions he too has had. Father Damien has seen, in the throes of a pernicious fever, the kind of manifestations of the spirit world his Anishinaabe parishioners hold sacred.

In another of his many letters to the Pope, Father Damien conveys to the “Eternal Father” a brief narrative of his numinous experiences when he writes, “[t]he people to whom I have carried the faith believe there is a spirit behind or informing all that exists on earth. In dreams, they tell me, these spirits communicate with them. I thought it a harmless and empty fancy until I myself was visited” (192). While suffering with a high fever, Father Damien has seen a demon in the form of a black dog, a demon with whom he bargains for the life of

Lulu. Damien had seen this apparition once before at a distance, but this time the dog was in his cabin, menacing and threatening Lulu's life. The demon tells Damien, "I will spare Lulu if you come with me instead," and the Father replies, a "priest puts the welfare of his flock above all else, for they are entrusted to him by the author of the world, and so even in this lonely and unspeakable moment, my duty is clear" (191). Damien sacrifices his eternal life in place of the child's and with this act demonstrates the absolute depth of his commitment and his love, a love that surpasses all dogma, all doctrine, all creed, and elevates Father Damien to the fullest of human capacity.

Syntheism of transcendence in essence rejuvenates a familiar religion by viewing it through the theological lens of another and synthesizing the two into a cohesive whole that exceeds the sum of its parts. Erdrich recognizes the value in transcending dogma, for in an interview with Allan Chavkin, she says:

[r]eligion is a deep force, and a people magnetize around the core of a belief system. It is very difficult for one individual to remain loyal to both although my own grandfather managed the trick quite well...by refusing to see the distinctions between the embodiments of spirit. He prayed in the woods, he prayed in the mission, to him it was all connected. (231)

This element of interconnectedness, a rising above the personal or cultural aspects of religions and instead grasping at a spiritual homogeneity among belief systems manifests itself both in the pages of Erdrich's novels and in the author's experiences. An analysis of the syntheism continuum extant in her work, shows that Erdrich promotes a syntheism of transcendence through the character of Father Damien, for he exemplifies genuine and selfless love for his parishioners, and his tendency to transcend boundaries—gender, cultural, and religious—seems to elevate his status in the novels to that of a saint.

Contrary to Pauline, who believes she can put on the lamb's clothing to cover her true nature, Damien exhibits genuine saintliness. Pauline was drawn to Catholicism through the image of the Virgin Mary, and image she worshipped rather as an idol than as a model of morality and selflessness. As Agnes, Damien left behind the trappings of the material church and came to embody all the traits of sainthood. In fact, Father Jude arrives on the reservation to ratify the beatification of Leopolda (Pauline), but after much investigation, he finds the character of Leopolda wanting and that of Father Damien most worthy of recognition as a representative of biblical teachings.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The apocalyptic events that surround Catholicism's conversion policy as it manifested itself in Native American society in general and in the Anishinaabe experience in particular stand as a shameful era in Church history, yet the tenacity of the Anishinaabeg as resourceful survivors symbolizes hope for Native Americans. Although the religious practices of the Anishinaabeg have largely been oppressed, repressed, or forgotten, Erdrich's novels suggest the old gods still survive in the recesses of their collective memories, and with effort and keen attention they may still find within themselves the strength and wisdom these deities are waiting to impart.

As Maroney notes, the major religions "did not win because they were superior...but because they played unfairly" (Maroney 187), and these dominant religions have shaped our history and our society in sometimes negative ways. However, discussions of only the broader social and cultural marginalization of Native Americans, despite the intent to interpret or codify those events, serve to further marginalize the individual, whose psychological experience may have few if any similarities to the larger social institution. As one belief system

collides with another, the point of impact becomes a ground zero of sorts within the psyche of an individual, and the resulting fallout becomes disjointed clusters of convictions and intuitions and suspicions. One faces a choice to shun the new religion and remain isolated in the safety of what is familiar, or one may choose instead to disown one's family and heritage and religion in an effort to assimilate, but these choices ignore the possibility that spiritual matters transcend the narrow borders of a religious practice. Another perspective might recognize religion as a starting point, a foundation for one's spiritual growth, and in this sense the seeker finds, as Agnes did, that one must wander away from the confines of the material church, and one must become the prodigal in order to chart a singular path through the deeper realms of the soul. And in such a vacuum of doctrine, those archetypal spirits may stir beneath the water, and that individual may do well to rework the old stories, to form a new belief, a syntheism, for *belief* is the story we tell ourselves.

Syntheism is an individual creation, crafted and woven together by experience and interpretation of that experience, and as such there exists few means by which to either qualify or quantify this continuum of adaptation. Literature provides one possibility, for such a continuum manifests itself in the characters of a story, and careful analysis of story material reveals nuances of each character that reflect the subtlety of human psychology. The story is woven

together like a quilt, uneven here, crooked there, but nevertheless fleshing out the soul of both time and the teller. The story propagates our continuum of experience and of humanity. Whatever that experience may be, whether tragic or triumphant, it is our telling of that experience, to ourselves and to others, it is the story we weave that gives us hope and carries us toward our destiny or brings us despair and casts us into isolation. Are we victors or villains or victims? We decide as we gather material, incorporating some fragments and rejecting others, and bind those sketches of memory into wholeness, into a story we can *live* with.

Erdrich recognizes the power of the story, for she tells Joseph Bruchac, “there’s something particularly strong about a *told story*” (Chavkin 103), and she mentions allowing that strength of a story to infuse her writing, letting the story “tell itself” without trying to “control the story” (Chavkin 104). Her characters have their own stories to tell, and Erdrich allows their imagined experiences to guide her writing. However, individual interpretations of an event depend on individual perspectives, for Erdrich’s characters are all experiencing the same hegemonic pressure, yet their individual responses to that experience vary in significant ways. Within the framework of syntheism, her characters reveal the complexities of an individual psyche and the subjectivity of experience. Using syntheism as an analytical approach provides a means for reinterpreting existing

conclusions about the effects of colonization and forced assimilation and instead framing such discussions relative to the impact on individuals. Viewing Native American literature through the lens of syntheism also offers a means of discovering new dimensions of the religious confluence that continues to influence the Native American experience.

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