

## LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE ROUND HOUSE*: RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN A COMING OF AGE THRILLER

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*In a novel critics have described as a "thriller-like" coming-of-age story, Louise Erdrich's The Round House (2012) integrates two apparently conflicting approaches to Native American law. First, Felix S. Cohen's Handbook of Federal Indian Law legitimizes the need for working with allies to Indigenous peoples in developing contextual applications of settler state laws. The second draws on the authority of authorless Anishinaabe stories and dreams. While Cohen and his descendants in tribal law practice are allies to the Anishinabeg, dream narrations by the narrator's grandfather affirm the contemporary vitality of Anishinaabe approaches to justice. Finally, Erdrich's narration suggests why restorative justice for women in Indigenous communities in the United States should matter for her international audience.*

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Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* (2012) has been described as "an artfully balanced mystery, thriller and coming-of-age story" of the first person narrator, 13-year old Joe Coutts (Cihlar 2012). The winner of the National Book Award for Fiction in 2012, the novel was named a *New York Times* Notable Book and Best Book of the Year by *The Washington Post* ("The Round House," Harper Collins). Reviewed and recommended by book clubs throughout the English-speaking world,<sup>1</sup> its widespread appeal as well as its acclaim is clear. The suspense and page-turning readability of the novel also provides access to its cultural work. This work can be described as a means of building among a wide audience, awareness of the ongoing problems of violence against women on Native American reservations. The problems involve tangled histories of legal jurisdiction issues and continuing injustice. In her Afterword, Erdrich notes that these problems are as real in our time as they were in 1988, when the novel is set (Erdrich 2012, 318).<sup>2</sup>

My article contributes to a growing body of scholarship on *The Round House* that explores various means through which the novel brings attention to the larger legal and historical contexts perpetuating tribal injustice. These injustices continue to harm both women and men in Indigenous communities.<sup>3</sup> In the following discussion, I complicate

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<sup>1</sup> See for example [www.litlovers.com](http://www.litlovers.com), [www.harpercollins.com](http://www.harpercollins.com).

<sup>2</sup> See also Erdrich's *New York Times* article on "Rape on the Reservation" (2013).

<sup>3</sup> In "Erdrich's Crusade: Sexual Violence in *The Round House*," for example, Julie Tharp considers how Erdrich positions the reader as witness as a way of untangling the web of legal, social, and historical effects of violence on the reservation. Matthew L.M. Fletcher's "Anishinaabe Law and *The Round House*" discusses the conflicts between the settler state and Anishinaabe justice systems in terms of world views, legal precedents and access to power. In her insightful discussion of the conflicted moral position of the victim's son, Laura Roldan Sevillano's "From Revenge to Justice: Perpetrator Trauma in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*" (2016) introduces the often neglected issue of perpetrator trauma, shedding light on the multiple ways in which the novel expresses legacies of historical trauma within the spaces of the family and the local community.

the ways in which Erdrich motivates the reader to question conventional ideas of justice that label those involved either as innocent victims in need of protection, or as guilty perpetrators who deserve to pay for their crime. Her practice of “twinning” characters and contexts for narration suggests that Anishinaabe<sup>4</sup> and settler state legal approaches, though flawed, are both needed in addressing issues of gendered justice for Native women on reservations. Equally important, the work of reading the novel through the lens of a 13-year-old male narrator may get more men to read the book. It may lead to openings for shifting men’s deeply held attitudes towards women, as well as women’s internalized gendered views of their own lack of social agency. For her part, Erdrich states in the novel’s Afterword that she has the politicized intention to contribute, through her writing, to the process of increasing safety for women on reservations, and to help reduce the daily anxiety many women still feel about the possibility of being raped or attacked.

To address these issues of physical and psychological safety in a way accessible to a wide audience, Erdrich departs in this novel from her usual practice of using multiple and shifting narrative voices, and instead develops the point of view of a single narrator. Joe, as narrator and main character, is at the center of a web of double meanings related to place, characterization, and historical context. The multilayered stories that Erdrich tells in this novel include various types of twins, beginning with the two houses in and around which many of the events take place. The round house and the house where Joe lives with his mother and father, frame the development of various pairs of characters. There is also the “twin” relationship between Joe as the adult narrator compared to his 13-year old self; Joe as a contemporary character compared to his role as a reinvention of the Anishinaabe cultural hero/trickster, Nanapush<sup>5</sup>; the character Linda Wishkob in contrast to her twin brother Linden Lark; and Lark as a contemporary criminal but also the mythical “Wiindigoo” monster. The Wiindigoo in Anishinaabe tradition is a vampire-like figure who was once human but who became a cannibalistic monster with a frozen heart. Considered beyond reconciliation with the community, the only way to solve the problem the Wiindigoo poses for itself and others is to kill it. (Johnston 1976, 165-167).

Erdrich’s own writing identity also enacts a “twin” identity: she is an acclaimed American writer whose novels strike familiar chords with readers from many backgrounds and places. She also identifies strongly as Anishinaabe and is an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians. An ongoing concern in her

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<sup>4</sup>The Anishinaabeg people are also known as the “Chippewa” and the “Ojibwe.” “Chippewa is the official name given by the U.S. government, and is used on treaties; the name “Ojibwe” is another name given by white colonizers. Many believe that both terms derive from the Algonquin word “otchipwa” and refer to the “puckered” seam of moccasins (*Ojibwe History*). Members of the nation call themselves “Anishinaabe” (or “Anishinaabeg” in the plural). The language is “Ojibwemowin” or “Anishinaabemowin,” although “Anishinaabemowin” is also sometimes used to describe languages of other North American Indigenous peoples. “Ojibwe” or “Ojibwemowin” refers specifically to the language of Ojibwe people, and is used by Indigenous speakers of the language, including Erdrich (First Speakers). Because Ojibwe was originally an orally transmitted language, spelling practices vary. In our time of language revitalization most writers and scholars use the system developed by Charles Fiero known as the “Fiero System” or the “Double Vowel System.” Because Erdrich uses it, I do as well in my spelling of “Anishinaabe” and “wiindigoo” (“Short Notes on Ojibwe Grammar”). When I refer to members of Indigenous communities in North America in general, I use the terms “members of Indigenous communities,” “Native Americans,” or “Natives” interchangeably. I include “Indian” in places I quote.

<sup>5</sup> Nanapush is also known as Nanabush, and Nanabozho.

novels, her works of nonfiction, short stories, children's books, and poetry is the survival and revitalization of Anishinaabe and more generally, Indigenous culture.

Elsewhere in many of her novels, Erdrich draws on sacred twin mythology, a practice she shares with numerous other contemporary Native American writers such as Paula Gunn Allen, Beth Brant, Joy Harjo, and Leslie Marmon Silko, and Luci Tapahanso (Rainwater 1999, 145-154). In Indigenous mythology, twins are not always blood relations, but may be born at different times to different families. Twinning also relates to ideas of complementarity that is not the same as dualistic opposites. This concept of balance emphasizes the integration of diverse and sometimes conflicting parts, into a creative whole. It is a tenuous, dynamic relationship that constantly needs attending. In Erdrich's work, it is difference within apparent similarity represented by twins that needs to be unpacked. Erdrich develops these dynamics, for example, through women characters such as Marie and Lulu in *Love Medicine*, in Pauline and Fleur in *Tracks*, in the mythical twins at the beginning of *The Antelope Wife*.<sup>6</sup>

Catherine Rainwater, in *Dreams of Fiery Stars*, examines selected novels by Native writers as "twin" texts. Her intention is to suggest ways in which intertextual relationships, both between and within texts, relates to their "revisionary and regenerative purposes." (Rainwater 1999, 132). To explain how this relationship is expressed through the process of reading, Rainwater notes that when we meet a new text, we set it in a metatextual frame provided by other similar texts we have internalized. We draw on the narratives that have shaped our own experience, in our families, in the media, religion, and in the education we have inherited from our culture(s). We recognize an 'invariant' which is a storyline we expect. This 'invariant' is challenged in some way by the 'variant' we confront in the story.

With regards to contemporary Native American texts, Rainwater suggests that readers become familiar with the kinds of narratives developed by Native writers, and therefore read a new text by an Indigenous writer with these in mind. This body of writing serves a political and ethical purpose of providing a wide audience of readers with an empathic opening into the injustices to Native peoples since European contact. Erdrich would agree with the Anishinaabe educator Maya Chacaby that "While Anishinaabe pedagogy and research practices are all part of our inheritance, so too is a legacy of colonial violence and historic trauma" (Chacaby 2011, ii). The process of writing and reading Native texts that are meant for a mainstream readership can therefore contribute to the process of which Martin Luther King spoke in his 1965 speech: "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

Readers familiar with Native American novels expect to meet characters who find themselves in some sort of a liminal place, whether through illness or injury, in relation

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<sup>6</sup> Marie lives her life in as orderly, morally upright a fashion according to Christian standards, and considers going into the convent, whereas Lulu does not worry about the judgments of others and has her children with multiple husbands and partners. Pauline and Fleur respond in very different ways to the epidemic that kills many of their relatives; while Pauline becomes the nun Sister Leopold. The correspondence in temperament between Marie and Pauline as Sister Leopold become clear when, in *Love Medicine*, Sister Leopold takes Marie as her protégé at the convent. From the reader's perspective, however, the relationship seems closer to the torture of the children by the witch in the Grimm Brother's Hansel and Gretel story. Fleur, on the other hand, retains the traditional values of the Ojibwe. The twins engaged in a beading competition to upset the balance of the world is a frame story for the plot of *The Antelope Wife*. See also Pollack 1995, 21

to their own communities and/or in the larger culture. Characters in Native novels often confront a serious gap between their sense of how the world should be and their present conditions. Although this awareness describes the universal human condition, for characters in Indigenous writing, the contrast, as Rainwater puts it, is between “ordered, traditional Indian realities” in contrast to a “cock-eyed, unbalanced, Euro-American world” (Rainwater 1999, 132-33).

For Rainwater, Native American writers introduce readers to traditional Native North American realities told through many “authorless but authoritative” stories. These stories have always contributed to the survival of Native cultures, not least since contact with Euro-Americans. In many of these texts authorless stories are reinvented through modernist and postmodernist modes, and through events familiar to readers from many backgrounds. At the same time, the inventiveness of an individual artist such as Erdrich makes it possible for her to mediate between traditional and contemporary Anishinaabe lives through her characters, and also to thrive as an acclaimed novelist in American culture, apart from any politicized work her novels accomplish.

### **The twin houses of the novel**

The two houses of the novel, which can be seen as juxtaposed metaphorically, suggest the ways in which lack of safety can permeate places that the reader would have assumed should be safe havens: the round house, the place where ceremonies were still held, and where tradition could be preserved and practiced the reservation, and Joe’s family’s house.

The round house is the location around which the rape of Joe’s mother, Geraldine, occurs (Erdrich 2012, 54), while at their own house in the opening pages of the novel, Joe and his father try to pry the saplings described as “invading” the building’s foundations (Erdrich 2012, 1). From his perspective of narrator, the adult Joe looking back to his 13-year old self, the reader may see the connection, made palpable in Erdrich’s image, between the foundations of Joe’s assumptions about safety and the relationship he has with his parents. This safety begins to shift the moment he confronts the reality that his mother has been attacked.

The attacking seedlings are also a metaphor for the colonizing of Native culture in both a general and a specific way: the name of the rapist, Linden, is also the name of a tree. At the same time the image of attacking trees resists any straightforward equivalency. It is ironic that the invading forces are living trees in the world of non-human nature considering that Indigenous epistemology recognizes humans in a relational world where minerals, plants, animals, and humans depend on each other for survival. The image can also be read as a challenge to the romanticized stereotype of Native peoples living in harmony with nature. As the setting for the opening pages of the novel, then, this image signals that Erdrich writes a contemporary novel about specific characters struggling with their own conflicts in a time and place. She also translates Indigenous ways of knowing the world for readers from a variety of backgrounds.

The effects of the rape of Joe’s mother at the round house “invade” the interior of their house in a number of other scenes. For example, when Joe first returns to the house after several days of staying with his aunt and uncle, he tries to come in through the back door but is surprised to find it locked. Even before he gets inside, he realizes that his literal sense of being welcome and at home has left. After he retrieves the key where it is kept

hidden and lets himself in, he is struck by how the inside air “seemed hollow in the house, stale, strangely flat” (Erdrich 2102, 22). The house in this passage is much like a character communicating the lingering shock and sense of paralysis that the family is experiencing. As Joe walks through the various rooms, he senses a “tremendous hush” like “something that follows in the wake of a huge explosion. Everything had stopped. Even the clock’s ticking” (Erdrich 2012, 22). His house is not a haven from the recent violence outside, but more a container for what cannot yet be understood with words or felt with any clear emotion. Literary theorist and trauma scholar Cathy Caruth describes trauma in a way that relates to this scene, as an *aporia* that can only be recognized by its aftereffects (Caruth). Joe confronts one such belated effect when he goes upstairs to find his mother “sunk in heavy sleep” (Erdrich 2012, 22). Just as the quiet downstairs is not a peaceful stillness, likewise Geraldine is not sleeping restfully, but rather seems to have collapsed under the weight of the violence she has narrowly survived. Joe tries to “throw himself down” and tells her that the milk in the refrigerator is sour, as if in a desperate effort to have the caretaking mother he knows be returned to him. Instead, she hits him in the face with her forearm (Erdrich 2012, 22).

What happens inside Joe’s house also indicates the small ways in which he begins to work through his own experience of the trauma. When Bazil cooks dinner for the three of them for the first time since the attack, the atmosphere changes: it both sharpens the contrast between the way their lives had been and the effects of the trauma, and also suggests small beginnings to working through their shared trauma:

In our dining cove, my mother was standing behind her chair with her hands nervous on the wooden back. The fan was on, stirring her dress. She was admiring the meal laid out on the plain green cloth. I looked at her and was immediately ashamed of my resentment – her face was still garishly marked. I busied myself. My father had made a stew. The collision of smells that hit me when I’d entered the kitchen were the ingredients – sour turnips and canned tomatoes, beets and corn, scorched garlic, unknown meat, and an onion gone bad. The concoction gave off a penetrating reek. (Erdrich 2012, 35).

This apparently mundane scene of a family preparing to sit down to dinner can also be read as a reverberation of the recent trauma at the round house. Geraldine’s hands, “nervous” on the back of the chair, hint of the effort to prop herself up as she is just beginning to stand on her feet again. In noticing her “admiring” the meal, he portrays her as a spectator and guest rather than the central role preparing her family’s meals as she usually does. The narrator becomes aware of his own ambivalent feelings confronting the sight of her “still garishly marked” face. It also seems striking that the reader is not given the detailed sensory information about the face that we receive for the “plain green” table cloth, the meal that includes “sour turnips” and “scorched garlic.” While the single modifier “garish” allows the reader to imagine for ourselves what Geraldine looks like, the adjectives “sour,” and “scorched” extend the sense of how Joe feels as he looks at her injuries. His emotions collide much like the colliding smells of the food: His resentment, we can imagine, relates to how she clearly cannot be his caretaking mother in that moment. The sense of shame that quickly replaces resentment signals that although barely an adolescent, Joe is quickly gaining the consciousness of an adult that his needs are not at the center of the world.

Joe's "collision" of feelings points to a change in the larger environment as well. A fan creates a small breeze to move the air that days earlier Joe had found "stale" and stifling. Another contrast from the preceding days is that in this scene Joe's mother has made the deliberate effort to walk downstairs to eat. Rather than reacting instinctively by striking him in the face as she did when Joe plopped on the bed next to her, here she actively appreciates the effort her husband and son have taken to prepare dinner. Her facial expression, stance, and the elements in the room all suggest that she could slowly be starting to release some of her trauma.<sup>7</sup> Joe's reactions, too suggest a small shift in his awareness of the moral implications of the situation; he responds how a 13-year old boy can be expected to respond, resentful that she is not there for him, and then his sense of shame shows him a larger perspective.

The Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison's description of her own painstakingly process of conveying moral truths through literature is equally relevant for Erdrich's intentions to contribute to social justice illustrated in the passages above:

What I am determined to do is to take what is articulated as an elusive race-free paradise and domesticate it. I am determined to concretize a literary discourse that (outside of science fiction) resonates exclusively in the register of permanently unrealizable dreams... My confrontation is piecemeal and very slow. Unlike the successful advancement of an argument, narration requires the active complicity of a reader willing to step outside established boundaries of the racial imaginary (Morrison 1997, 8).

Like Morrison, Erdrich questions the patterns in mainstream American culture that promise but cannot deliver on the idea that "liberty and justice for all" is possible for anyone who makes the effort to thrive in America. In *The Round House* she provides an empathetic window onto entrenched, everyday racist violence that citizens of Indigenous communities in the United States peoples experience in 2018 just as much as they did in the 1980s when the novel is set.

Erdrich also shares with Morrison an approach to using twin images of houses:<sup>8</sup> the imagined ideal of "home" as a place where a person will not be hurt, versus the conflicted, often violent dynamics experienced both in the round house, and in the house where Joe, his mother and father live with its foundations cracking under the pressure from the roots of seedlings looking for their own home. Both of these evoke the contrast between Gaston Bachelard's "felicitous space" characterized in *The Poetics of Space* as an imaginative space of safety and happiness on the one hand, and the "infelicitous spaces" where Erdrich leads her readers to witness the gaps between the racial imaginary and realities.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Gabor Maté notes that trauma is not an event that happens to a person, but rather the force of the energies held inside in the absence of an empathetic witness (Maté). In this scene, Geraldine has two witnesses who are feeling her pain.

<sup>8</sup> See Morrison's evocative image of the idea of home in her 1997 essay, "Home.": "In this new space one can imagine safety without walls, can iterate difference that is prized but unprivileged, and can conceive of a third, if you will pardon the expression, world 'already made for me, both snug and wide open, with a doorway never needing to be closed.' Home." (Morrison 1997, 12).

<sup>9</sup> See also Helen May Dennis's discussion of a range of Native American and mixed blood novels as representing both felicitous and infelicitous space. Denis argues that Native authors writing in English "contribute to the enlargement of the universe of human discourse" (Dennis 2007, 3-6). Erdrich's novels can be said to do this work in terms of their effect of introducing a broad audience to the historical labyrinth

### **Joe's development through the lens of Indigenous epistemology**

Scholars in various fields have described Indigenous epistemology as including several key elements summarized succinctly by Michael Anthony Hart: First, it is characterized by “a fluid way of knowing” that comes from teachings that have been passed down from one generation to the next through storytelling. Each story, retold, comes to life in a slightly different way in a particular place and time, narrated by a new storyteller. Through the narrative voice of Joe, along with two embedded stories in the voices of other characters, Erdrich does the “very slow” (to quote Morrison 1997, 8) work of showing the reader how a young boy's determination to set the world to rights changes the epistemological framework through which he relates to this world.

Second, Indigenous epistemology integrates perceptual experiences. Perception, within an Indigenous paradigm, involves not only the ability to use information about the outside environment and the body obtained through the senses, but it also draws on what Hart calls “a form of experiential insight” that gathers creative life forces and leads to a sense of wholeness (Hart 2010, 8). This process of expressing interior insights through the senses happens traditionally through rituals and ceremonies (Hart 2010, 8).

The round house is the place where “twin” practices of cultural and epistemological survival and adaptation to mainstream America have coexisted: “During the old days when Indians could not practice their religion—well, actually not such old days: pre-1978—the round house had been used for ceremonies. People pretended it was a social dance hall or brought their Bibles for gatherings” (Erdrich 2012, 59-60). The novel is set just ten years later, and for Joe and his two friends who support him on in the quest to find the identity of his mother's attacker, the location is a living being that contains valuable information, as well as a structure that once held ceremonies.

Its use as a place where experiential insight first comes alive for Joe:

Horses had pulled all the good plants up by the roots and now tense little weeds rasped beneath the tires of my bike. The log hexagon was set up on top of a slight rise, and surrounded by rich grass, vivid green, long and thick. I dropped my bike. There was a moment of intense quiet. Then a low moan of air passed through the cracks in the silvery logs of the round house. I started with emotion. The grieving cry seemed emitted by the structure itself. The sound filled me and flooded me (Erdrich 2012, 59).

The image of the uprooting of the plants by the horses reminds us of the prying loose of the saplings Joe and his father are unsuccessfully attempting in the opening passage. The low moan of air seems to speak to Joe, who is increasingly able to see and hear clues that lead him to knowledge about the identity of his mother's attacker, but also to another way of knowing. In the novel, this knowledge allows for communication with ghosts, and it validates the insights from dreams.

Erdrich suggests how her characters, and by extension contemporary Anishinaabeg people, practice an Indigenous “fluid way of knowing” that includes the ability to move

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of jurisdictional conflicts that make it extremely difficult to prosecute the perpetrators of most of the violent crimes against Native women on reservations. These reading politics are important in that they make apparent that what is at stake for the Native Americans represented in the novel is far more than the academic question of making room for multicultural literature in the literary canon.

between the “traditional” and “new” ways that shape his neighbors’ and as he learns, his father’s varied ways of thinking.<sup>10</sup> Joe has another experiential insight one night when he thinks he sees a ghost at the edge of their yard (Erdrich 2012, 80). Initially he is anxious about telling his father about it. At this point in the novel, both his parents have been portrayed in an empirical world that includes their choice of professional work on behalf of the community. Geraldine is a tribal enrollment specialist familiar with the complexities of jurisdiction and identity issues in historical context, while Basil is a tribal judge. As the adult narrator, Joe has earned a law degree from the University of Minnesota and like his father has returned to the reservation to work as a lawyer (Erdrich 2012, 246). Knowing about this future for his younger character places Joe’s openness to information other than empirical in context. The reader can understand that Anishinaabe ways of knowing are very much alive in the present, and that they include but are not limited to ways of knowing based on rational thinking and the five senses.

When Joe gathers the courage to mention his encounter with the ghost to his father, he is relieved to hear a different reaction than the one he expected:

Joe, he said, I worked in a graveyard... My father, so strictly rational that he’d first refused the sacrament and then refused to attend Holy Mass at all, believed in ghosts. In fact he had information about ghosts, things he’d never told me (Erdrich 2012, 81-82).

Joe considers that maybe the ghost he saw might have been trying to tell him something about who his mother’s attacker could be. Slowly, he is beginning to trust clues from a world beyond the five senses.

### **Mooshum’s story: the knowledge of dreams**

One of the most striking instances of this gradual opening of space for “other” voices is the passage where the Erdrich shifts from Joe’s narrative voice to narrate his grandfather Mooshum talking to himself in a dream (Erdrich 2012, 187):

Nanapush<sup>11</sup> himself said that whenever he was sad over the losses that came over and over through his life, his old grandmother buffalo would speak to him and comfort him. This buffalo knew what had happened to Nanapush’s mother. She said Wiindigoo justice must be pursued with great care. A place should be built

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<sup>10</sup> I place the terms “traditional” and “new” in quotations to emphasize that the dichotomy is more accurately interpreted as a paradox. “Traditional” ways of knowing and acting are only relegated to the past in a world view that recognizes time as chronological. In Indigenous epistemologies, time is viewed as circular and therefore tradition continues to live in the present. For a discussion of this issue, see Hogan.

<sup>11</sup> The name of this dream character is both one translation of the “Nanabozho” cultural hero of traditional stories, and also the name of one of the traditional characters in Erdrich’s earlier novels including *Tracks* and *Love Medicine*. The effect of this connection between her characters and the mythical figures draws attention to the character as her invention. Readers familiar with Erdrich’s work can recognize that she is “twinning,” to use Rainwater’s term. Erdrich “twins” *The Round House* and her previous novels, and Mooshum’s retelling of a authorless story with her own fiction. Erdrich also twins Mooshum and Nanapush, and perhaps equally important, Nanapush and Joe, whose mother has also suffered great injustice, and Mooshum and Joe the adult narrator.

so that people could do things in a good way. She said many things, taught Nanapush, so that, as he lived on, Nanapush was to become wise in his idiocy.

Joe recalls:

...when I woke I had forgotten Mooshum's story—although I remembered it later on in the day, when my father came to get me, because he said the word carcass. He was very pale and elated, and he was speaking to uncle Edward, saying, *They've got his damned carcass in custody*. At that moment, I remembered Mooshum's story entirely, vivid as a dream, and simultaneously knew they'd caught my mother's rapist" (Erdrich 2012, 187).

The passages above illustrate perceptual knowledge in practice, where having a safe relationship to a traditional place is central to the ability to continue to "do things in a good way." Doing things "in a good way," then, is not about holding to an abstract principle of justice or morality, but rather about being able to serve a community right where its individual members are, both geographically and psychologically. This passage comprises part of a second embedded narration, concluding a story about Nanapush's mother, Akii. Her community accuses her wrongly of being a Wiindigoo when Nanapush is 12 years old, about the same age as Joe in the novel. They try, but are unable to kill her in a variety of ways. Finally, they act on the belief that the only person who can successfully kill the Wiindigoo is a blood relative; they give Nanapush a knife and tell him to carry out the task, but he refuses. Instead, he helps to rescue Akii after a group of his neighbors throw her into freezing water through a hole in the ice. Later, on the verge of starvation, he "sang the buffalo song although it made him cry. He remembered how when he was a small boy the buffalo had filled the world" (Erdrich 2012, 184).

The buffalo is believed by some old men to have disappeared into a hole in the earth, in an ironically similar way that Akii disappears into the hole in the ice. Yet Nanapush trusts in the continued presence of the "buffalo song" he hears in his memory (Erdrich 2012, 184) while mourning the loss of a world before the arrival of European and American colonizers, where buffalo were plentiful. He finds the animal's tracks and kills the animal with his mother's hatchet and his father's gun. What is significant is his attitude toward the buffalo, which is one of sadness and respect: He sings, "Old Buffalo Woman, I hate to kill you, for you have managed to live by wit and courage, even though your people are destroyed [...] But then again, as you are the only hope for my family, perhaps you were waiting for me" (Erdrich 2012, 186).

In killing the buffalo, Nanapush not only does what the particular situation asks for, he also risks what other hunters have warned not to do, and goes inside the carcass of the dead animal to keep warm (Erdrich 2012, 186). Even though he almost freezes to death there when the animal's solid blood locks him to the buffalo's ribs, Mooshum says in his dream that "This buffalo adopted Nanapush and told him all she knew" (Erdrich 2012, 186). "All she knew" includes the song Nanapush begins to sing as he waits trapped in the buffalo. It is this song that leads Akii to find her son when she hears "the song she'd learned from the fish" (Erdrich 2012, 186) coming from the Old Buffalo Woman. The song Nanapush later hears from the Old Buffalo Woman, told by Mooshum in his dream, confirms for Joe and for the readers that Nanapush has been "wise in his idiocy." "Wise idiocy" in this case means not only that Nanapush fails to heed the practical survival

advice of adults, but also that he finds a way to survive through singing without meaning to do anything “wise.” In a larger sense, Erdrich shows him as a trickster who can unintentionally do the right thing that can also be a mirror through which others can see themselves, too, as lucky fools. Just as Nanapush in Mooshum’s dream saves rather than kills his wrongly accused mother, so does the trickster restore mental or psychological well-being to a community out of balance.<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, the image in Mooshum’s dream becomes for Joe a sign that he can trust his own unconventional search for “Wiindigoo justice” in seeking out his mother’s attacker. What Joe does not see at the time that his adult narrator can, is that the pursuit of justice for Linden Lark is much more tricky than he could have imagined. It will lead to a recognition at the end of the novel that Joe, along with his mother and father “all realized we were old” (Erdrich 2012, 317). “Old” in this case means gaining wisdom in hindsight. Like Nanapush after he wakes up inside the dead buffalo to find himself stuck there, Joe the adult narrator can see his younger self as smart in the short term. His actions have not, however, restored him or his community to well-being. Much like the dried blood of the frozen buffalo that traps Nanapush, Joe’s vigilante success ironically traps him in psychological guilt. He realizes, as do his parents, that revenge on Linden Lark cannot compensate for the brutality of his mother’s rape and near murder. Nor can it make up for the societal power imbalances that allowed it to happen.

If, as Toni Morrison writes, long-term justice can only be enacted when a sense of “home” is present where people together can create small, gradual changes, then 13-year-old Joe lacks such a place. Although he may be able to accomplish more than the adults around him, the reader can only wish that Bazil and the police could have helped more.

### **Linda’s Story: Knowledge in a rewritten “Indian Adoption Project”**

A second unexpected support for Joe is Linda Wishkob, the biological twin sister of Linden Lark, and an adopted member of the reservation community. Her story, like Mooshum’s, is told in her own voice in a separate section entitled “Linda’s Story” (Erdrich 2012, 115). Through Erdrich’s pairing of the twins Linden Lark and Linda Wishkob, the narration shows how the vitality of Indigenous knowledge does not depend

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<sup>12</sup> Erdrich often uses trickster figures in her novels, and as a writer often performs the role of the trickster. In many Indigenous traditions, this figure has the function of returning the world to balance. Trickster can assume a variety of human and nonhuman forms, and easily moves between these when necessary. As a shape-shifter, he or she can either trick others, seem to be tricked. The trickster often steps outside the norms for accepted conventional behavior, as Nanapush did in this story. Most important, however, is his or her central role which is to hold up a mirror of human behavior that needs to be addressed with more honesty than is expected or accepted at a given cultural moment.

For discussions of the trickster in various disciplines, including literary criticism, psychology, anthropology, ecocriticism, Indigenous studies, and gender studies, see for example, Radin, Carroll, Hyde, Jung, Ramsey, Blaezer, Holmes, Rosier, Sayre, Velie, and Castor. It is also worth noting that “trickster” is a generic term used by literary critics and other scholars. This term admittedly simplifies the diversity of stories with their specific meanings in communities where the name of a figure such as Nanapush, Coyote, Hare, Rabbit, or Raven is more relevant. For the Anishinaabeg, Nanapush (also Nanabozho or Nanabush) is a cultural hero who shows up in various guises. In some stories he acts like a fool. In others he fools others to help them see, and work to change embarrassing or shameful aspects of themselves (“[Legendary Native American Figures](#)”). It is not surprising, therefore, that this particular figure appears in Mooshum’s dream as a well-intentioned fool. Nor is it surprising that Joe overhears and decides to learn from his grandfather’s Nanapush story.

on blood quantum. It does emerge from the stories we feed ourselves and the communities where we hold ourselves accountable. Linden and Linda represent not so much the concepts of good and evil as innate moral qualities, as they enact destructive potentials and life-supporting capacities. Although these capacities could seem to simply substitute one set of types for another, the fictional characters Linden and Linda become more nuanced. Linda is an imperfect, bumbling, good-hearted woman who does not fit stereotypes. Without Linda's presence in the narration, Lark would be a flat and inherently evil character. The narrator's pairing the Windigo with Linda humanizes him, reminding the reader that this particular Windigo was at one time a person who could have learned how to express empathy for his fellow humans. The biological sister of the monster, Linda becomes a surprising source of trickster wisdom for Joe. In fact, she plays a central role in supporting Joe's vigilante efforts to pursue his mother's attacker. Her role becomes so important that the (adult Joe) narrator makes room for her to tell her own story in a separate section. This choice gives Linda's story a narrative status equal to that of Joe's grandfather Mooshum. Mooshum is the only other character in the novel who tells a story that could stand on its own, independent of the larger plot. "Linda's Story" traces her development as a cared for member of an Anishinaabe family and community, starting at the hospital where her adoptive mother, Betty Wishkob, who had worked as a night janitor, had received permission to take her home after Linda's biological mother, Grace Lark, had rejected her. (Erdrich 2012, 114-5).

Linda's adoption can be read in the historical context where the reverse was most often the case. While the attitude toward Native peoples that considers them capable of becoming "civilized" (as opposed to the other common idea expressed by Andrew Jackson that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian,") can be traced to Thomas Jefferson, recent federal policies have reflected the degree to which the racist roots of this thinking remains entrenched. As recently as 1958-1967, the Child Welfare League of America, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the U.S. Children's Bureau administered and funded the Indian Adoption Project. Under the Project, 395 Native American children from 16 Western states were placed in non-Native homes for adoption in the Midwest and Eastern United States.

On the one hand, many child welfare leaders involved in the Indian Adoption Project viewed it as an example of enlightened progress in adoption practices that has previously been characterized by racial prejudice against Native American children. On the other, in an influential study conducted from 1960-68 by respected child welfare researcher, David Fanshel, and published in *Far From the Reservation*, concluded that although it appeared that the majority of adopted children adjusted well, "It may be that Indian leaders would rather see their children share the fate of their fellow Indians than lose them in the white world. It is for the Indian people to decide." (The Adoption History Project").

In the context of Fanshel's study, Erdrich's characterization of the "fate" of a white child "lost" to an Indigenous community seems highly ironic. Grace Lark, Linda's mother who abandoned her to die at birth, only decides to contact her daughter when Grace wants Linda to donate a kidney for her twin brother. Linden is seriously ill in no small part because of his self-destructive lifestyle. In the novel, then, the question of who decides the fate of a biological child and for what reasons is less straightforward than implied in Fanshel's study.

Erdrich complicates Linda as a character in other ways as well. She is not a young, beautiful counterpart to Linden's evil, but rather, from Joe's perspective, at first just a overweight, funny-looking woman with "pop eyes," "little rat teeth," and "wispy hair" who is eager to make friends through the loaves of banana bread she keeps offering his family (Erdrich 2012, 114). Ironically, Linden has more classic "neat and regular" looks (Erdrich 2012, 124). Linda's poignant warm-heartedness endears her to the readers who realize that there is little in a practical sense that Linda can do to right the wrongs her brother has done. Paradoxically, however, Linda's apparent lack of social power allows her to make things happen as a trickster; she confirms Joe's suspicion that Linden Lark is indeed his mother's attacker, and gives Joe the confidence to pursue Lark. After Joe and his friend Cappy shoot and kill Linden, Linda and her family protect Joe from suspicion.<sup>13</sup> They help dismantle the gun he used, and scatter its pieces in the Missouri and in various backroad sloughs (Erdrich 2012, 300). In the development of Linda as a non-threatening, honest, smart character, Erdrich, too, plays the trickster. She help us see beyond Linda the unlikely twin of Linden Lark. Erdrich's narration shows what it means (emotionally, socially, politically, and morally) that Linda has been accepted and brought up in a supportive community on the reservation. We might consider how her case demonstrates that Felix Cohen's inclusive legacy is still relevant for restoring sovereign justice to Native American communities.

### **The Indian New Deal and Felix Cohen's legacy in *The Round House***

One of the most important sets of "twin" contexts is the "Indian New Deal" of the 1930s on the one hand, and the context of Anishinaabe law on the other. In an early scene, Joe recalls that his father refers to Cohen's *Handbook of Federal Indian Law* as the "Bible" (Erdrich 2012, 2). This attitude accurately describes the view of many Indigenous advocates for Native peoples' self-determination outside the novel as well (Russell, 2014).

Cohen's role in New Deal Indian policy was central. Allies, unlike either "friends" or "foes," cooperate in relation to a specific activity. As Assistant Solicitor at Interior under John Collier's leadership as Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Cohen's Jewish background directly influenced his vision for cultural integrity and autonomy for Native peoples during the 1930s. He explained the importance of this engagement:

We have a vital concern with Indian self-government because the Native American is to America what the Jew was to the Russian Czars and Hitler's Germany. For us the Indian tribe is the miner's canary, and when it flutters and droops we know that the poison gases of intolerance threaten all other minorities in our land." ("The Erosion of Indian Rights, 1950–53," qtd from *Yale Law Journal in Indian Country Today Media Network*).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Soon after Joe and Cappy kill Linden, the two of them along with friends Zack and Angus are in a serious accident when their car veers off a stretch of open highway and turns over. Joe, Zack and Angus survive but Cappy, the driver, tragically dies (Erdrich 2012, 316).

<sup>14</sup> Cohen also fought but was less successful in working on behalf of European Jews fleeing genocide, and Alaskan Natives fighting for fishing rights. See Russell.

Cohen's image of the miner's canary in this passage suggests that he views the need for autonomy of Native American communities in light of larger issues of dignity for all American minorities, and by extension for all Americans. His advocacy stands in sharp contrast to the paternalistic attitudes of 'friends of Indians' during the 1930s as represented by John Collier and the broad framework of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934.<sup>15</sup> As such his *Handbook* has been widely regarded as "The Bible" of modern Federal policy by lawyers and other advocates working on behalf of self-determination for citizens of Indigenous communities—including Joe's father.<sup>16</sup>

Just as Erdrich's development of the twins Linden and Linda cannot be simplified in terms of conventional oppositions, tribal jurisdiction problems are similarly part of a multilayered, continuing legacy of colonialism. These, too, cannot be reduced to a contest between those for and against Native rights.<sup>17</sup> Rather, when many tribes are confronted with violent crimes against women on their land, they continue to confront multiple contradictions. Erdrich refers to the 2010 Indian Law and Order Act as a recent sign of progress. She notes that it was designed to increase protections for Native American women by allowing the federal government to respond more effectively to the challenges it faces on tribal lands (Erdrich 2012, 318).

The Law has several components: First, it aims to make federal law enforcement and US Attorneys more accountable to Native communities. For example, when they decide not to investigate or prosecute a case on tribal lands, they are now required to work with tribal officials. The law provides more extensive training for law enforcement officials in addressing sexual assault and domestic abuse cases. Second, it seeks to give tribes increased power to hold perpetrators responsible for their crimes by increasing the maximum prison term from one to three years. Third, it seeks to improve the ability of the Indian Health Service to respond to violence against women by requiring specific training and regular procedures for addressing sexual assaults. Fourth, the Act focuses on prevention strategies through increased support to alcohol and substance abuse programs ("Tribal Law and Order Act," 2014).

Erdrich observes that the Act nonetheless leaves several crucial gaps: It does not apply to non-Native offenders except in limited cases where they are living or employed in Indian country, or "in an intimate relationship with a member of the prosecuting tribe" (Tharp 37). Consequently, as Tharp notes, "This means that 41 percent of all rapes, which are apparently committed by non-Indian strangers, are outside tribal jurisdiction" (Tharp 37). The information given on the Indian Law Resource Center web page relegates this

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<sup>15</sup> See for example "John Collier and Indigenous People's Contributions to the World."

<sup>16</sup> Cohen's *Handbook* went through several revisions from time it was first published in 1941. In the 1958 edition, his original emphasis on Indigenous communities self-determination was replaced with a view that regarded Native peoples more as problems to be dealt with by the Federal government than as groups deserving to be treated under the law with respect and equal standing. In 1971 a facsimile version of the original was recovered and served as the basis for a new edition mandated under the 1968 Indian Civil Rights Act. The revision was completed in a new version that once again reflected the Cohen's intentions in 1982, six years before the events in *The Round House* take place. Significantly, Erdrich introduces the *Handbook* in the opening pages of the novel. Bazil gave Joe his annotated copy with handwritten comments on every page (Erdrich 2012, 2). This detail reinforces not only the personal connection Joe felt to Cohen as an ally to Native people. It also suggests that the references Joe makes to the book are from either the 1941 or 1958 version ((*Felix Cohen's Handbook*, Erdrich 2012, 2).

<sup>17</sup> This legacy is reinforced through the ineffectiveness of the police, the doctor, and most importantly, the priest who is a more complicated and comical character than his role might suggest.

exclusion to a parentheses, but Erdrich notes that studies have shown that “86 percent of the sexual violence on reservations upon Native women is perpetrated by non-Native men: few are prosecuted” (Erdrich 2012, 319). Although the Act increases tribal court authority to set higher maximum sentencing limits, for felonies, it limits sentencing to nine years total per case, with a limit of \$15,000 in fines (FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, 2012). Erdrich also credits numerous organizations working on behalf of Native women. In particular she draws the readers’ attention, in boldface print, to the fact that of the two pages of organizations she mentions, only four are actively “working to restore sovereign justice and ensure safety for Native women” (Erdrich 2012, 319). In sum, her literary contribution to the work of restorative justice can be read as a twinning of two contextual strands: It translates traditional stories about the Wiindigoo and the trickster Nanapush for a broad, contemporary readership, and it educates her readers about the New Deal historical legacy of Felix Cohen.

### **Between dualistic thinking: Erdrich’s twinning of settler state and Anishinaabe law**

The issue Erdrich raises about the gaps in the Indian Law and Order Act suggests that working for change in the face of the legacy of colonialism is certainly not just a matter of choosing either Anishinaabe or settler state concepts of law. Rather it includes a need to consider how to use Federal Indian policy (since the New Deal as represented through Cohen’s *Handbook*) along with Anishinaabe narration through characters such as Mooshum and Joe. Joe learns a perceptual way of knowing where he pays attention to the information from ghosts, dreams, and from the wind at the round house.

Joe’s father, educated as a lawyer in the American settler state legal system, can be seen as “twinning” the words of the Buffalo Woman in Mooshum’s dream. His career path, which has brought him back to practice law on the reservation, suggests that the opposition between apparently “old” Anishinaabe and “new” ways of practicing law is a false one. Rather, both Bazil and the adult Joe at the time of his narration, exemplify how contemporary law on behalf of Anishinaabe people can be practiced; the law must be applied in specific contexts. For example, the reader sees how it is not possible in 1988 to create a safe place represented by the round house in Mooshum’s dream because the Wiindigoo forces represented by Linden Lark have violated this place at the core. Part of the reason is because U.S. Federal Law does not yet provide the adequate protections to tribal communities such as Joe’s. Both in her narration through the voices of various characters, and in her more direct statements at the end of the novel, Erdrich thus makes a compelling case for the need to reframe Anishinaabe concepts of law with the help of allies outside their communities.

For example, Bazil explains to Joe:

These are decisions that I and many other tribal judges try to make. Solid decisions with no scattershot opinions attached. Everything we do, no matter how trivial, must be crafted keenly. We are trying to build a solid base here for our sovereignty. We try to press against the boundaries of what we are allowed, walk a step past the edge. Our records will be scrutinized by Congress one day and decisions on whether to enlarge our jurisdiction will be made. *We want the right to prosecute criminals of all races on all lands within our original*

*boundaries*. Which is why I try to run a tight courtroom, Joe. What I am doing now is for the future, though it may seem small, or trivial, or boring, to you” (Erdrich 2012, 229-30).

Erdrich, expressing similar ideas to the ones she discusses in her Afterword, speaks through the voice of Joe’s father in this passage. Her purpose, like Basil’s in talking with his son, is pedagogical, political, and moral. Basil explains how his work as a tribal judge “for the future” matters when Joe, as the reader knows, will himself become a lawyer. At the heart of her narrative vision expressed directly in her Afterword is the line she italicizes: “*We want the right to prosecute criminals of all races on all lands within our original boundaries.*” Just as Basil and his colleagues “keenly craft” every word in their decisions, so too must Erdrich craft every word in her novel, similarly to Toni Morrison in her process of exposing American culture’s “racial imaginary” (Morrison 1997, 3-12). Paradoxically, while Joe assumes that the small cases his father often has to address are “boring,” Erdrich’s crafts the plot of *The Round House* to keep her audience in suspense. Speaking through Joe’s father in this passage, she can communicate political and moral positions without telling her readers what we should think.

In the Afterword Erdrich explains that Anishinaabe law, too, needs to be “keenly crafted.” The reader sees that we can trust her as a scholar as well as a novelist where she credits legal scholar and teacher John Borrows’ *Drawing Out Law* for helping her to understand the contemporary applications of Wiindigoo law. In Borrows’ text, as in United States Federal policies influenced by Felix Cohen, Anishinaabe laws need to be respected and used in tandem with U.S. Federal law (Erdrich 2012, 318).<sup>18</sup> Borrows’ grandmother speaks with the first person narrator (who represents Borrows in his role as professor of Anishinaabe law and writer) in a way that echoes Basil’s words to Joe:

I am grateful for our stories and ideas, they do help me move forward, but I understand blood running from wrists and a hunger that can never be filled. It’s easy to sit here and philosophize about healing, and talk about how our stories should guide our actions. But it’s more difficult than words. Don’t get me wrong, it’s a very important thing you are trying to write about and understand. You should keep working at your book; it may do some good, as long as you remember that words are never sufficient to convey the complexity of our laws. You also have to practice law. It has to be experienced. It has to be lived. How many people do you think will believe Wiindigoos still shadow the land, even with your explanations, grandson? We can’t dismiss Wiindigoos lightly, but many will doubt their existence (Borrows 2010, 227).

It is not a matter of whether or not the reader believes that a character like Linden who represents the Wiindigoo could exist. This issue is one that Borrows’ grandmother implies some people will pay most attention to, and probably dismiss. Her point, and Erdrich’s, is that “it’s more difficult than words.” Linden’s character represents a force for destruction of safety, communal support and the ability to prosecute those who violate the safety and other core values of the community. In both passages above, Erdrich underscores the need for flexible legal approaches. She also makes a convincing case for the power of authorless stories and contemporary literature to convey the magnitude of harm a figure such as Linden Lark can perpetuate in a community.

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<sup>18</sup> See Cohen’s text from 1941: <http://thorpe.ou.edu/cohen.html>.

### **Toward a conclusion**

Erdrich “twins” two complementary approaches to law, the Felix S. Cohen *Handbook of Federal Indian Law* approach that works to legitimize the need for contextual applications of the law, and the storytelling approach as represented in the dreams narrated by Mooshum. Cohen and his descendants in contemporary American federal law can be seen as allies to citizens on reservations, while the Nanapush story Mooshum tells in his dream can remind readers that Anishinaabe law, informed by Indigenous epistemology, needs to be applied in the context of a specific situation. Joe, Geraldine, and Bazil are all aware of the line they need to walk “with great care,” in the words of the Buffalo Woman in Mooshum’s dream.

However, Joe as a 13-year old character seems able to think in less predictable ways than his parents can to find some sort of justice. His role has a counterpart in Nanapush of Mooshum’s dream where it is said that he “lost trust in authority.” He has “decided to stay away from others and to think for himself, even to do the most ridiculous things that occurred to him” (Erdrich 2012, 214). Joe can take unconventional initiatives because he is young and not as steeped in knowledge of all the legal and historical obstacles to real justice of which his parents are aware. He is thus able to take seriously the evidence he finds in dreams and ghosts, and act on it. However, the risks Joe takes also lead him down a path of vigilante “best-we-can-do” justice that ultimately haunts him and his family, even as he narrates the story as an adult (Erdrich 2012, 306). At the end of the novel, revenge does not lead to long-term justice for women in the community, nor restore a sense of emotional and physical safety to their family’s lives.

Neither Borrows nor Erdrich would suggest that their readers should try to draw confident conclusions from a particular historical case or from information presented in a dream. Instead, both writers urge readers to find spaces where “people can do things in a good way” (Erdrich 2012, 187). This challenge means that readers could consider how cases and stories invite us to look at our perhaps unexamined assumptions about “others,” and then to work where in our own ways to affirm the dignity of our fellow humans who may not look, speak, or act like us. Joe’s father Bazil Coutts and Linda Wishkob in the novel are good examples of this practice, as is Felix Cohen in his historical policies.

One often overlooked site where this process can happen is in the imaginative space created by novels such as Erdrich’s. Unlike the actual place of the round house in the novel, still susceptible to violation by Wiindigoo forces in current political structures, the space of the imagination allows readers gradually to pry ourselves loose from Morrison’s “racial imaginary.” Erdrich translates Morrison’s concept into the experience of listening and speaking in a face-to-face community. In so doing, she creates an imaginative environment where readers can think seriously about the legal or political issues she raises through *The Round House*. In short, Erdrich’s development of “twinning” through characters, images, and Anishinaabe stories woven into a suspenseful plot, motivates us to consider why we, too, could care about the need to restore sovereign justice for Native American women on reservations.

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