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Immediate and Immortal:

How Competing Narrators and Reader Involvement Define Storytelling in *Tracks*

Native American storytelling is a polyvocal, cyclical, and adapting method of recording their history; it also allowed for healing and expression of the spirit. Although storytelling was mostly conveyed verbally in the past, the increasing encroachment of white culture forced the natives to assimilate and—consequently—many stories found their way into writing by both white and Native writers. More traditional natives claim that recording stories defeats their original intent: to be forever changing, growing, and present, but authors like Louise Erdrich argue that novels can achieve the same goal. Erdrich uses *Tracks* to show that all avenues of communication, especially focusing on verbal and written communication, can empower its speakers and create a lasting tale. However, Erdrich ventures further than other native novelists by using competing narrators with similar pasts—a mixed-blood Catholic convert and a true trickster figure—to involve readers in the multiple interpretations of the novel. Namely, her readers can define the truth, the construction, and the growth of Native storytelling in a novel format.

Like Native American stories, the tales of Nanapush and Pauline—though oftentimes contradictory—are simply different versions of the same story. Both narrators are the sole survivors of their blood family and “use their lives and stories to establish alternative spiritual families and ritual-oriented communities” (Hughes 89). Additionally, the two narrators contribute “to the novel by ‘telling stories,’ in the double sense of narrating and lying...[and] operate as a potential prophet, speaking words of other-worldly vision and social critique” (Hughes 89). Both

Nanapush and Pauline experience loss and trauma, both witness supernatural enigmas, and both build new families and identities to cope. The story of Fleur is also told through the two narrators, and—because Nanapush and Pauline are so different—readers are able to see both interpretations of Fleur’s power: the will of the spirits or a champion of the devil. However much the story is about Fleur, the stories are also about the people who tell them. Nanapush’s tale goes through his survival, relationships, and identity within the tribe. He uses his past trauma as a way to learn and teach—giving crucial guidance to key figures throughout the novel. Pauline’s tale follows her conversion to Catholicism and her construction of a new self. She transcends her trauma to live a new and better life. Readers who have also experienced trauma can easily relate to one of the two stories because, when stripped of the personal parts, it becomes a choice of making the best of what one has or making something new. Using these conflicting choices, Nanapush and Pauline tell completely different tales: one about the collective and one about the individual.

Akin to traditional Native American storytelling, Erdrich directly involves her readers as a central part of the story, which keeps her readers engaged and makes them draw their own conclusions about the novel. As a small but notable example, the character Nanapush tells his story directed at his granddaughter Lulu, but—due to the story’s first-person style—he addresses her as “you.” This technique is a simple yet effective way to catch the reader’s attention and draw them further into the story. Contrarily, readers are unsure who Pauline is relaying her story to. Because of the neglect of the personal “you” and the focus on herself and her intimate journeys, one can assume that Pauline’s story is written in more of a diary-like format. By writing Pauline’s conversion story focusing on herself alongside Nanapush’s true storytelling, Erdrich further accentuates Nanapush’s similarity to traditional native roles and ideas. Not only is he directing his story to someone in particular, but he also is focusing on the collective; as in, Nanapush’s story is

not just about himself, it is about Lulu, Fleur, Eli, Margaret, and many others. Pauline and Nanapush reflect on one another as well, creating not just a story that focuses on themselves or their spiritual family, but also on tearing apart the other's story, which makes interpreting the narrators' position much more difficult for readers.

Beyond just who they are or are not speaking to, Erdrich's use of competing narrators forces readers to choose which narrator's story they believe, which parts to believe, or whether to believe in either. Nanapush's story is one of "subjugation and displacement inflicted on them [the natives] by a culture that is not their own" (Shilaja 93). By telling his story to his granddaughter, he enforces "that remembering is painful, but those who suffered must not forget in order to recover" (Shilaja93). Passing on his story of Fleur to Lulu "is a ritual through which he brings Lulu back to Fleur" (Shilaja 99) and reconcile her bond with the tribe, which is a direct contrast to Pauline's story. Her narration is "a representative of the mixed-bloods" (Shilaja 99) and portrays Fleur as the pinnacle of irreparable nativity. Nanapush, being an important, influential, and active participant in the tribe, follows a very traditional path—one where storytelling is such an important part of his life, that it is a means of survival. According to Sergi, Erdrich uses Nanapush to capture the act of Indian storytelling, and claims that although it is written down:

Erdrich wishes to record and preserve not just the memories, intertwined closely with personal history and a sense of loss, but a cultural tradition, one that is oral, performed, formulaic, and perpetuated by the storyteller, who learns the rhythms and melodies—the craft—and expands, ornaments, and varies the tradition his or her own way. (Sergi 279)

Nanapush survives because of storytelling—in the case of talking death away during illness—but storytelling also survives because of Nanapush. By telling his story to Lulu, going in detail about all of the action as if it were happening real-time, and playing up Fleur's power, Nanapush creates

a traditional Native story which remembers and can be passed along worldwide in the novel format. Pauline also tells her own version of the story, but she portrays Fleur as a servant of Satan, the source of her power being from a monster that only Pauline—a good, self-punishing Christian woman—can pray away. Pauline is telling her story to no one directly and when she speaks to people, she always lies and shrouds her narcissism in piety. Pauline and Nanapush tell their stories in completely contradictory ways, which forces the reader to determine who is telling the “good” story and which is the “bad” one. Although they do so in different ways, both narrators portray themselves as some form of hero—though Nanapush takes more of a side hero approach while Pauline is the bastion of her own power—and as heroes, the reader will have difficulty choosing a side. Both heroes tell a different tale, weaving the other as a sort of villain, so the burden now lies on the reader to discover the “truth” of the novel.

Because both characters view themselves and one another in completely different ways, it is left to the readers to uncover the “truth” of the story. Readers that finish a Pauline chapter might be left feeling sorry for her conflicting religious beliefs and sympathize with her, or they may find her to be a spiraling sociopath. Readers that finish a Nanapush chapter might believe he is a bastion of wholesome traditionality, or they may think of him as a malevolent, old trickster. Readers may also flip between believing good or ill in the narrators, and from there, they may also view Fleur as the bride of Satan or a chosen water warrior. The characters themselves do not help with these conflicting interpretations, as Nanapush oftentimes comments on Pauline’s lying, saying:

She was worse than a Nanapush, in fact. For while I was careful with my known facts, she was given to improving truth. Because she was unnoticeable, homely if it must be said, Pauline schemed to gain attention by telling odd tales that created damage. There was some question if she wasn’t afflicted, touched in the mind. (Erdrich 39)

In this statement, Nanapush claims that he is a better storyteller than Pauline because he doesn't lie, and he even goes so far as to say that something may be wrong with her mentally. Pauline, on the other hand, has similar claims about Nanapush. Pauline claims that Nanapush "was informed by Satan, sent to me on purpose to test my resolve. He meant to bar me from gaining joy in the presence of my Savior" (Erdrich 150). Because of him teasing her repenting ways and being overtly sexual with her, he becomes a conduit of evil in her eyes, which would make him the villain if viewed with a Christian scope. Due to their constant teasing and negative views of one another, it becomes increasingly difficult for readers to see the truth of the story. As Reid rightly points out, "'Truth' is also a culturally defined category; in an oral performance... any story that is told is always a *version* of the story, altered as the storyteller sees fit to keep the audience interested, make specific points, or add a personal interpretation" (Reid 69). Using antithetical narrators ensures that readers will make the final judgements on the characters and their stories. The ability to find out one's own personal truths is a crucial element to Native American storytelling, as it allows the listener to play a part in the adaptations of the story, interpreting their own meanings and passing on new versions for the cycle to be repeated.

Another element of Native storytelling is its ability to change and grow allowing it to encompass more people, which Erdrich achieves through the dichotomy of her narrators. Although Erdrich mostly relies on Nanapush to represent storytelling traditions, she also incorporates Pauline as an important aspect of perspective. As Reid claims, by:

Drawing on both Native American oral traditions and conventional Euro-American narrative forms, Erdrich creates a new set of textual gestures that can more faithfully capture the multiple voices and extended family networks of Native American "individuals." Her narratives also allow the representation of a larger community identity

and weave her audience into the fabric of their extended family and its stories of survival.
(Reid 67)

By using both traditional Native values and more Euro-American values—through the narrators Nanapush and Pauline respectively—Erdrich provides more opportunities for readers to connect to the story. Most Native stories that involve the encroaching Euro-American culture would portray individuals pressuring them to assimilate as something negative, but Erdrich goes so far as to make such an individual one of the key narrators in her novel. Although providing contrary narrators may seemingly work against her portrayal of Native American storytelling, Erdrich uses both Nanapush and Pauline to “speak from vantage points that differ in gender, generation, religion, and community standing” (Reid 71). Pauline, to most readers, would probably be seen as crazy or a failure, but her perspective offers an important change to the novel. Instead of the familial bias readers get from Nanapush, Pauline is willing to speak and accuse ill of Fleur which is something everyone but her immediate family and friends do. Giving Pauline her voice lets readers see Fleur in a different light, changes the story laid out by Nanapush, and develops Fleur’s character. Contrarily, Nanapush is willing to speak ill of Pauline and question her personage, which those she later associates herself with in the church sphere do not do. Pauline’s conversion to Catholicism allows her criticize her former beliefs, and Nanapush’s involvement but dissociation with Catholics allows him to criticize their beliefs. Erdrich therefore “neither wholly silences nor wholly loses the tongues of competing characters and traditions in her novel, instead showing them to be inextricably bound to each other” (Hughes 88). Offering such conflicting opinions opens other avenues as well. Not only do the stories grow next to their foils, but the

Identity, community, and meaning hold no single “place” in the text: they are relational, rhetorical, and contingent constructions that emerge in the critical and inspirational spaces

between and among characters, narrators, authors, and readers. And both “justice” and “truth,” for individuals in relation, ultimately take shape only as effects of storytelling. (Hughes 88)

All aspects of the characters, cultures, and settings are questionable under the authority of those characters, narrators, Erdrich, and even the readers. Justice and truth changes based on one’s own interpretation and so the multivocality of the text creates “a balance between seeking truth through the accretion of different community viewpoints” (Reid 71-2). Providing narrators that come from very opposing sides of the Native community—one an old wise man connected to the tribe and the other a woman leaving the tribe physically and spiritually—creates the different scales of the balance to which readers tip by adding the weight of their own perspective. Thus, the novel strikes an equilibrium, a shifting font of extrapolation, that is both adaptable and buildable.

Perhaps the most explicit claim in favor of a novel format for Native American storytelling is the resolution of Pauline and Nanapush’s lives. Both narrators show readers the importance of the written word—Pauline gains a new life by reading and practicing the Word, and Nanapush “outlives his blood relatives because he can read two sets of tracks’ animal and ink” (Hughes 91). Although he claims that writing his name down strips his power, it is through his recorded name that he is able to begin saving Lulu and invoking her spiritual regeneration; eventually, he gains a job involving paperwork and begins working on saving the tribe from the deforestation and construction work enforced on them by white culture. Therein, his “life story *is* the tribe’s life story; his adaptation to a new bureaucratic identity at the end of the novel literally and figuratively ensures the survival of the tribe” (Reid 79). Nanapush, for more traditional Native readers, could also be a nudge of encouragement to adapt only enough of the modern culture to enhance their present power instead of completely converting like Pauline and losing their nativity. Regardless,

both characters emphasize that power comes from spirituality and words, and Erdrich's stories prove that the two are reliant on one another: one can reach spirituality through words and words can free the spirit.

Tracks uses competing narrators to build a polyvocal narrative which changes and grows depending on the different interpretations made by readers. Like vocal stories, the novel has parts that are unreliable, unrealistic, and undermined by other storytellers. However, the novel also relates to vocal Native stories in its immortality. Shilaja claims that "tradition depends on memory, thus traditional storytelling depends on memory" (Shilaja 100), and novels are an example of a memory preserver. Novels allow people's stories to be spread across the world, touching numerous lives, affecting numerous people, and receiving numerous interpretations. They are criticized and acclaimed, fictional and historical, immediate and immortal much like Native storytelling. By converting her stories into novels—especially a series that focuses on a tribe over a long period of time—Erdrich ensures that their memory will live on forever, regardless of who is reading the tale. Although the stories themselves—when printed—cannot be altered, Erdrich's presentation of competing narrators allows the story to adapt constantly. *Tracks* proves that Native storytelling can be presented in a written media, maintaining their ability to change, grow, and survive throughout multiple generations.

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