



Indigenous Haunting and Colonial Violence in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* and *The Round House*

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of colonial violence and spectral memory in *Tracks* and *The Round House* by Louise Erdrich. Drawing upon Indigenous literary criticism, trauma theory, and narrative studies, the paper argues that Erdrich reconfigures haunting through Indigenous relational epistemologies rather than Western Gothic frameworks centered on absence and psychological estrangement. In both novels, spectrality emerges through land, storytelling, ancestral memory, and communal continuity within spaces shaped by settler colonialism. *Tracks* represents colonial dispossession as both ecological and epistemological violence through the fragmentation of Indigenous relationships to land and spirituality, while *The Round House* exposes the institutional violence produced through jurisdictional instability and the failure of settler legal systems to protect Indigenous women. The paper further demonstrates how Erdrich's narrative techniques, including recursive temporality, shifting narration, and oral storytelling structures, challenge colonial historical frameworks that confine Indigenous cultures to the past. By linking ecological dispossession, legal fragmentation, and narrative form, Erdrich transforms haunting into an Indigenous mode of continuity through which ancestral presence and communal memory persist despite colonial attempts at erasure.

Keywords: Louise Erdrich, Indigenous Haunting, Spectral Memory, Settler Colonialism, Indigenous Continuity.

Introduction

Contemporary Indigenous literature consistently challenges colonial narratives that position Native communities within frameworks of disappearance, silence and historical closure. Rather than portraying Indigenous cultures as remnants of a vanished past, Native writers foreground

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enduring relationships among land, memory, spirituality, kinship and communal continuity. Storytelling within Indigenous literary traditions therefore becomes more than artistic expression. It functions as cultural preservation, historical resistance, and relational remembrance. Within this tradition, Louise Erdrich occupies a central position because her fiction examines how settler colonialism continues to shape Indigenous life while simultaneously affirming Native presence through narrative continuity and ancestral memory. Her novels *Tracks* and *The Round House* are especially significant because they reveal how colonial violence persists across generations through both material and psychological structures. Although the novels are separated by different historical settings, they remain connected through their representation of land as a living archive of memory, trauma, and Indigenous endurance.

In many Indigenous epistemologies, land is not understood as passive property or geographical territory. It exists as a relational presence inseparable from identity, spirituality, and communal knowledge. Vine Deloria Jr. (2003) argues that Indigenous traditions privilege “spatial thinking” rooted in lived relationships to place rather than abstract systems of ownership (p. 61). This relational understanding fundamentally differs from colonial frameworks that transform land into commodity and resource. Erdrich’s fiction repeatedly dramatizes the violence produced through this collision of worldviews. In *Tracks*, colonial intrusion emerges through logging operations, allotment policies, disease, and economic displacement that gradually fracture Ojibwe communal life. The landscape itself bears the marks of this disruption. Matchimanito Lake, forests, and reservation spaces carry ancestral memory even as colonial modernity attempts to reorganize Indigenous space through capitalist expansion and legal control.

Erdrich frequently renders this relationship between land and memory through vivid sensory imagery. Early in *Tracks*, Fleur Pillager emerges from the lake after surviving a storm that many believe should have killed her. The scene unsettles both the community and colonial logic because Fleur appears inseparable from the spiritual world surrounding the lake itself. Pauline recalls that Fleur “came out of the water and flicked herself dry” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 11), a description that dissolves the boundary between human presence and elemental force. The image positions Fleur not as a supernatural curiosity within a Gothic framework but as a figure embedded within Ojibwe cosmology where spiritual and natural worlds remain interconnected. Her relationship with the lake establishes one of the central ideas developed throughout the novel: land preserves Indigenous memory and spiritual continuity even under conditions of colonial disruption.

A similar relationship between violence and space structures *The Round House*. However, while *Tracks* focuses upon ecological dispossession during the early twentieth century, *The Round House* examines the contemporary legal fragmentation governing reservation life. The novel reveals how colonial violence continues to operate through jurisdictional systems imposed upon Indigenous land. Geraldine’s assault becomes inseparable from the question of where the crime occurred because legal authority shifts across tribal, federal, and state boundaries. Reservation geography therefore becomes politically charged terrain where colonial law determines whose suffering receives recognition and whose remains institutionally neglected. Through this framework, Erdrich demonstrates that colonialism survives not merely through historical memory but through contemporary legal structures that continue to weaken Indigenous sovereignty.

At the same time, Erdrich’s fiction reconfigures haunting through Indigenous relational epistemologies that differ fundamentally from Western Gothic traditions. In conventional Gothic literature, haunting frequently signifies fear, psychological repression, or the return of unresolved absence. Ghosts often emerge as symbols of anxiety and estrangement. Erdrich

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transforms this framework by representing spectrality through Indigenous understandings of ancestral continuity and relational presence. Spirits, memories, and the dead remain connected to communal life rather than separated from it. Avery Gordon (1997) argues that haunting reveals unresolved social violence that continues to shape the present. Similarly, Renée Bergland (2000) connects Indigenous spectrality to the politics of settler colonialism and Native erasure. Erdrich extends these frameworks by portraying haunting not solely as a traumatic return but as an enduring Indigenous presence grounded in land, storytelling, and communal memory.

This distinction becomes especially visible through Fleur Pillager in *Tracks*. Fleur's presence repeatedly destabilizes colonial divisions between reality and myth, human and nonhuman life, spirituality and material existence. The community associates her with water spirits, storms, and uncanny survival. Pauline recalls that people believed "Misshepeshu lived in the lake and that Fleur was his relative" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 34). Rather than presenting Fleur through Gothic monstrosity, Erdrich situates her within Ojibwe spiritual traditions where ancestral and natural forces remain active within everyday life. Fleur therefore embodies Indigenous continuity rather than spectral absence. Her presence resists colonial rationalism precisely because it cannot be fully contained within Western systems of explanation.

A different but equally powerful form of haunting structures *The Round House*. The novel is haunted less by visible spirits than by the lingering presence of violence within domestic life, communal memory, and institutional structures. Geraldine's silence after the assault transforms the family home into a space marked by emotional fracture and unresolved fear. Joe observes that "she had become someone else" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 78). The sentence captures the psychological fragmentation produced through trauma, but it also reveals how violence reshapes relationships, language, and ordinary space. Trauma in the novel remains socially and historically embedded rather than isolated within individual experience. Joe gradually recognizes that the assault against his mother reflects larger colonial structures that continue to expose Indigenous women to legal vulnerability and institutional neglect.

Historical trauma therefore functions as a connecting force between the two novels. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart et al. (2011) define historical trauma as cumulative emotional and psychological wounding transmitted across generations through collective experiences of dispossession and violence. Erdrich's fiction reflects this continuity by portraying colonial injury as both historical and ongoing. In *Tracks*, Nanapush recognizes that land dispossession threatens more than physical survival when he warns that "the land will go out beneath us" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 33). The phrase "beneath us" carries profound ontological significance because it positions land as the spiritual and epistemological ground sustaining communal existence itself. Colonialism therefore destabilizes not merely territory but the relational structures through which Ojibwe identity is maintained.

A similar awareness emerges in *The Round House*, where Joe's realization that "the story begins with a crime" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 1) frames violence as the foundational condition of the narrative. The statement extends beyond the assault itself because the crime emerges from a colonial legal system that fragments Indigenous sovereignty and limits tribal authority. Violence in the novel is therefore institutional as well as personal. Erdrich demonstrates that colonial law continues to shape Indigenous experience by regulating justice, geography, and bodily vulnerability within reservation life.

Erdrich also employs narrative form itself as an expression of Indigenous survivance. Gerald Vizenor (2008) defines survivance as an active Indigenous presence resisting narratives of victimhood and disappearance. In both novels, fragmented chronology, cyclical memory, oral storytelling patterns, and multiple narrators challenge Western linear models of history.

Past and present repeatedly overlap, allowing ancestral memory and historical trauma to remain active within contemporary experience. Arnold Krupat (1992) observes that Native narrative traditions often resist singular authority through dialogic structures grounded in communal storytelling. Erdrich mobilizes these techniques not simply as stylistic experimentation but as narrative enactments of Indigenous relational epistemology.

This paper argues that in *Tracks* and *The Round House*, Louise Erdrich reconfigures haunting away from Western Gothic frameworks of fear and absence toward Indigenous relational epistemologies grounded in land, ancestral continuity, and communal memory. While *Tracks* portrays the ecological and spiritual disruptions produced by colonial dispossession, *The Round House* exposes the continuing violence embedded within contemporary legal structures governing reservation life. Through spectral memory, nonlinear narration, and relational understandings of land, Erdrich transforms haunting from a discourse of spectral absence into an Indigenous narrative practice through which memory, ancestral presence, and communal continuity actively resist colonial erasure.

Land, Ecology, and Colonial Dispossession in *Tracks*

In *Tracks*, Louise Erdrich represents land as a living epistemological presence through which Ojibwe memory, spirituality, and communal identity are sustained. Colonial dispossession in the novel therefore exceeds the seizure of territory because it attempts to dismantle the relational structures grounding Indigenous existence itself. Through ecological imagery, unstable narration, and spiritual spatiality, Erdrich demonstrates that colonial modernity seeks to reorganize Indigenous life by separating land from ancestry, memory, and ceremonial continuity. Yet the novel simultaneously insists that Indigenous presence remains embedded within the landscape despite the violence of allotment, environmental extraction, and religious assimilation. Haunting in *Tracks* thus emerges not through Gothic estrangement but through the persistence of Indigenous relational worlds that colonial systems repeatedly fail to erase.

From its opening pages, the novel situates colonial violence within ecological collapse. Nanapush recalls the years of disease, starvation, and death that devastated Ojibwe communities during the early twentieth century, explaining that “we started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 1). The sentence initially appears observational in tone, yet its imagery transforms communal suffering into environmental rhythm. By linking death to snowfall, Erdrich dissolves the distinction between human tragedy and ecological space. Colonial violence is therefore spatialized across the landscape itself rather than confined to individual bodies. The repetition of “snow” and “fall” also creates cyclical movement that resists linear historical closure. Death accumulates seasonally and collectively, suggesting that trauma in the novel circulates through communal memory rather than remaining isolated within singular events.

Nanapush’s storytelling reinforces this relational understanding of history. Unlike colonial historical discourse, which frequently organizes Indigenous experience through bureaucratic chronology and territorial measurement, Nanapush narrates memory through weather, movement, animals, and seasonal return. His voice repeatedly shifts between personal recollection and communal testimony, blurring distinctions between individual and collective experience. Arnold Krupat (1992) argues that Native narrative traditions often privilege dialogic and communal structures over singular historical authority. Erdrich mobilizes this storytelling mode formally through Nanapush’s nonlinear narration, where memories emerge associatively rather than sequentially. The reservation landscape consequently becomes an active narrative presence rather than passive setting. Forests, lakes, and cabins do not merely contain history; they participate within its transmission.

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This relationship between land and communal continuity becomes especially urgent through the novel's representation of allotment. The Dawes Act attempted to fragment collectively held Indigenous land into individually owned parcels, enabling the gradual transfer of Native territories into settler possession. Erdrich represents this process as both material and epistemological violence. Nanapush recognizes the destabilizing force of allotment when he warns that "the land will go out beneath us" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 33). The phrase "beneath us" carries profound ontological weight because it positions land as the sustaining ground of Ojibwe identity itself. Dispossession therefore threatens more than geography. It destabilizes the spiritual and relational structures through which communal existence becomes meaningful. Erdrich's spatial language transforms colonialism into a crisis of orientation in which the very ground of Indigenous continuity risks collapse.

If allotment attempts to fragment Indigenous relationships to land materially, Fleur Pillager's presence resists this fragmentation at both spiritual and narrative levels. Fleur repeatedly destabilizes colonial divisions between the human, natural, and supernatural worlds. Pauline recalls that Fleur "came out of the water and flicked herself dry" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 11), an image that immediately unsettles conventional realism. Fleur's emergence from Matchimanito Lake blurs the boundary between body and landscape, suggesting an intimacy with ecological space that exceeds colonial rationality. Water in the novel functions not merely as an environmental setting but as ancestral and spectral presence. Its fluidity destabilizes fixed boundaries between material and spiritual existence, allowing memory and cosmology to circulate beyond Western categories of explanation. Fleur is therefore not haunted by the lake in the Gothic sense. Rather, she exists relationally within its spiritual ecology.

This distinction is central to Erdrich's reconfiguration of haunting. In Western Gothic traditions, spectrality frequently signifies estrangement, repression, or psychological disturbance. Fleur, however, embodies continuity grounded in Ojibwe cosmology. Pauline observes that the community believed "Misshepeshe lived in the lake and that Fleur was his relative" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 34). The association with Misshepeshe, the powerful water spirit, situated Fleur within Indigenous spiritual knowledge that colonial epistemology cannot fully contain. Christopher Teuton (2008) notes that Indigenous storytelling traditions often refuse rigid separations between material and spiritual reality because ancestral presence remains embedded within everyday life. Erdrich extends this cosmological framework formally through narrative indeterminacy itself. Fleur's spectrality rarely emerges through direct explanation. Instead, it is mediated through Pauline's unstable focalization, where fascination, fear, resentment, and uncertainty continually overlap. By filtering Fleur through Pauline's fragmented consciousness, Erdrich withholds epistemological certainty from the reader. Haunting consequently emerges not through supernatural revelation alone but through the instability of colonial interpretive frameworks themselves.

Pauline's narration becomes increasingly fractured as she internalizes Catholic asceticism and settler moral ideology. Unlike Nanapush, whose storytelling sustains communal memory through relational continuity, Pauline attempts to discipline both body and consciousness through religious extremism. Her descriptions of Fleur oscillate between reverence and hostility, exposing a divided epistemic position shaped by colonial assimilation. Yet Pauline can never fully sever herself from Ojibwe cosmology. The spiritual world she attempts to reject repeatedly returns through dreams, visions, and bodily anxiety. Erdrich therefore dramatizes colonialism not only as territorial invasion but also as psychological fragmentation. Pauline's narrative instability reflects the impossibility of fully translating Indigenous relational worlds into colonial systems of meaning.

Environmental extraction throughout the novel intensifies this epistemological conflict. Logging operations repeatedly appear as violent acts of fragmentation that convert living

ecological space into commercial resources. Trees cease to function as communal presences connected to ancestral memory and instead become objects of capitalist accumulation. Joni Adamson (2001) argues that Indigenous ecological traditions privilege reciprocal relationships with land rather than extractive ownership models. Erdrich contrasts this relational worldview with the logic of colonial capitalism, which reduces forests, lakes, and territory to economic value. Descriptions of lumber activity emphasize cutting, removal, and displacement, mirroring the broader violence of allotment itself. Colonial modernity attempts to sever Indigenous communities from the ceremonial and ecological relationships sustaining collective identity.

Despite this violence, *Tracks* repeatedly insists upon the persistence of Indigenous memory within the landscape. Stories continue to circulate through reservation paths, cabins, forests, and water, preserving communal continuity against colonial erasure. Nanapush's storytelling itself becomes an act of ecological remembrance through which land remains connected to kinship and ancestral knowledge. Gerald Vizenor's (2008) concept of survivance becomes especially significant here because Erdrich does not portray Indigenous existence merely through survival after catastrophe. Instead, the novel constructs active Indigenous presence through storytelling, spatial memory, and ceremonial continuity.

Through Fleur's spectral intimacy with Matchimanito Lake and Nanapush's acts of ecological remembrance, *Tracks* ultimately reimagines haunting not as the return of absence but as the persistence of Indigenous relational worlds that colonial modernity repeatedly fails to erase. Colonial dispossession attempts to fragment land from memory, spirituality, and communal identity, yet Erdrich's narrative continually restores these relationships through storytelling and spectral continuity. The novel therefore transforms land itself into an enduring site of Indigenous survivance where ancestral presence remains active despite the ongoing pressures of colonial containment.

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Trauma, Law, and Jurisdictional Violence in *The Round House*

In *The Round House*, Louise Erdrich shifts the representation of colonial violence from ecological dispossession to the institutional fragmentation governing contemporary reservation life. While *Tracks* portrays colonial intrusion through allotment, environmental extraction, and spiritual disruption, *The Round House* examines how settler colonialism persists through legal structures that weaken tribal sovereignty and expose Indigenous communities to continuing violence. The novel particularly foregrounds the vulnerability of Indigenous women within overlapping systems of federal, tribal, and state jurisdiction. Yet Erdrich refuses to represent trauma solely through victimization. Instead, she reveals how memory, storytelling, communal intimacy, and ceremonial continuity continue to sustain Indigenous presence despite the failures of colonial law. Haunting in the novel therefore emerges not through supernatural spectacle but through the lingering institutional and emotional afterlives of unresolved violence.

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From the opening sentence, Erdrich situates violence as the organizing structure of the narrative. Joe states, "the story begins with a crime" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 1). The declaration initially appears direct and almost procedural, echoing the language of legal narration. However, the sentence gradually acquires deeper historical resonance as the novel unfolds. The "crime" extends beyond Geraldine's assault because the narrative increasingly reveals colonialism itself as a juridical structure grounded in the regulation of Indigenous bodies, territories, and sovereignty. Erdrich therefore transforms crime from an isolated event into a systemic condition shaping reservation life. The simplicity of Joe's opening statement also masks the emotional fragmentation underlying the narrative. By presenting trauma retrospectively, Joe attempts to organize violence into coherent narrative form, yet memory repeatedly disrupts that effort through recursive return and emotional instability.

Joe's retrospective narration becomes formally significant because it reflects the fragmented temporality of trauma itself. The novel moves through recollection rather than immediate chronology, allowing memory to loop unpredictably between ordinary adolescence and scenes marked by fear, confusion, and grief. Certain details recur obsessively within Joe's consciousness, especially Geraldine's silence after the assault and the family's inability to restore ordinary domestic rhythms. Cathy Caruth (1996) argues that trauma often resists direct representation because it returns belatedly through repetition and fractured memory structures. Erdrich extends this condition narratively by allowing Joe's voice to oscillate between youthful immediacy and adult retrospection. The result is a temporally unstable narrative in which the past remains emotionally unresolved within the present. Trauma consequently emerges not simply as remembered violence but as an ongoing disturbance shaping consciousness itself.

Geraldine's silence after the assault intensifies this atmosphere of emotional haunting. Joe observes that "she had become someone else" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 78), a statement whose emotional restraint makes the transformation more devastating. Erdrich avoids melodramatic description and instead represents trauma through withdrawal, fragmentation, and altered domestic space. Geraldine's silence gradually reorganizes the emotional structure of the household. Rooms become marked by tension and absence, ordinary routines deteriorate, and communication collapses into guarded gestures and unfinished conversations. The home itself becomes haunted by what cannot be fully spoken. Dian Million (2013) argues that Indigenous trauma narratives reveal the emotional afterlives of colonial violence that remain embedded within communal experience rather than isolated within individual psychology. Erdrich reflects this relational dimension of trauma by showing how violence radiates outward through family dynamics, memory, and spatial atmosphere.

This emotional fragmentation is inseparable from the legal structures governing reservation life. Geraldine's assault becomes difficult to prosecute because jurisdiction depends upon the precise location of the crime and the racial identity of the perpetrator. Erdrich exposes how colonial law fragments Indigenous sovereignty through overlapping and often contradictory legal systems. The novel reflects the historical consequences of decisions such as *Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe* (1978), which restricted tribal authority to prosecute non-Native offenders on reservation land. Similarly, the Major Crimes Act transferred significant judicial authority from tribal nations to federal institutions, limiting Indigenous legal autonomy. Erdrich does not present these legal realities abstractly. Instead, their effects emerge through frustration, delay, and emotional exhaustion as Joe's family confronts a system structurally incapable of protecting Indigenous women.

The uncertainty surrounding the location of the assault becomes symbolically important because geography itself determines legal visibility. Geraldine's suffering exists within a fractured jurisdictional landscape where justice becomes contingent upon territorial categorization. Reservation space in the novel is therefore politically unstable terrain shaped

by colonial legal borders imposed upon Indigenous land. Jill Doerfler et al. (2013) argue that settler legal systems often undermine tribal sovereignty by fragmenting Indigenous authority across competing jurisdictions. Erdrich dramatizes this fragmentation through narrative tension itself. Characters repeatedly encounter procedural barriers, incomplete information, and institutional hesitation, producing an atmosphere where violence persists precisely because responsibility remains divided.

The round house becomes the novel's most symbolically charged site within this legal and emotional landscape. Traditionally associated with ceremony, communal gathering, and spiritual continuity, the structure occupies sacred significance within Ojibwe cultural memory. After Geraldine's assault, however, the round house becomes marked simultaneously by trauma and ceremonial persistence. Erdrich refuses to reduce the space entirely to violence. Instead, the structure remains suspended between violation and continuity, fear and sacred memory. This duality is central to the novel's reconfiguration of haunting. Colonial violence attempts to transform Indigenous ceremonial space into a site of rupture, yet ancestral and spiritual significance continue to inhabit the structure despite that injury.

Joe's relationship to the round house reflects this tension between inherited continuity and traumatic disruption. As he searches for answers surrounding the assault, the structure increasingly becomes a space onto which historical violence accumulates. Yet the round house also preserves forms of communal memory that exceed colonial legal frameworks. Its circular architecture symbolically contrasts with the rigid territorial divisions imposed through settler jurisdiction. Whereas colonial law fragments land through borders and categories, the round house gestures toward relational continuity grounded in ceremony, kinship, and collective presence.

Joe's eventual decision to kill Linden Lark reveals the profound ethical instability produced through institutional failure. The novel does not present Joe's act as heroic resolution. Instead, Erdrich situates it within the moral exhaustion generated by colonial injustice. Joe's movement toward violence reflects the absence of legal protection available to his family and community. The judicial system's inability to prosecute Geraldine's attacker creates conditions in which personal vengeance emerges as an alternative form of justice. Yet the narrative remains emotionally unsettled after Lark's death. Trauma persists because institutional violence cannot be resolved through individual retaliation alone.

At the same time, *The Round House* continually resists total despair through communal intimacy, humor, and storytelling. Joe's friendships, family relationships, and interactions with elders preserve emotional continuity despite the pervasive atmosphere of fear and grief. These moments interrupt the novel's juridical violence with forms of relational endurance grounded in Indigenous communal life. Gerald Vizenor's (2008) concept of survivance becomes especially relevant here because Erdrich portrays Indigenous existence not through passive suffering but through active continuity maintained across generations.

Through fragmented narration, juridical instability, and emotionally haunted space, *The Round House* reveals how colonial violence persists within contemporary legal systems governing reservation life. Yet Erdrich simultaneously demonstrates that Indigenous memory, ceremony, and communal relationships continue to exceed the structures designed to contain them. Haunting in the novel therefore emerges not as Gothic terror but as the enduring presence of unresolved colonial histories within law, space, and consciousness. By exposing the limits of settler justice while foregrounding Indigenous relational continuity, Erdrich transforms trauma into a narrative site where communal endurance resists colonial historical closure.

Narrative Form and Indigenous Continuance

Across *Tracks* and *The Round House*, Louise Erdrich uses narrative structure itself to challenge colonial historical frameworks that position Indigenous communities within narratives of disappearance and closure. Rather than organizing time through linear progression, Erdrich constructs stories through layered memory, recursive temporality, shifting perspectives, and oral storytelling rhythms that privilege relational connection over singular authority. Narrative in these novels therefore functions not merely as representation but as cultural practice. Through storytelling, ancestral knowledge, communal memory, and kinship remain active despite the disruptions of colonial modernity.

Both novels resist the assumption that history unfolds through stable chronological sequence. Instead, memory moves associatively across generations, landscapes, and emotional experience. Colonial violence is never confined entirely to the past because its effects continue to shape consciousness, family structures, and communal life in the present. At the same time, Erdrich avoids presenting Indigenous experience solely through suffering or historical loss. Her narratives repeatedly reconnect characters to ceremony, humor, relational care, and inherited knowledge, creating literary structures grounded in endurance rather than historical disappearance.

This formal movement becomes especially visible in *Tracks* through the alternating narrations of Nanapush and Pauline. Their competing voices destabilize the expectation of objective narration associated with Western realist fiction. Nanapush narrates through recollection shaped by emotional and communal association rather than rigid chronology. Stories emerge through landscape, seasonal movement, kinship, and memory, often shifting fluidly between humor and grief. Arnold Krupat (1992) observes that Native storytelling traditions frequently privilege dialogic exchange instead of centralized narrative authority. Erdrich adapts this relational mode formally by allowing multiple interpretive perspectives to coexist without final resolution.

The contrast between Nanapush and Pauline also reflects opposing epistemological frameworks shaped by colonialism. Nanapush's storytelling sustains communal bonds by reconnecting memory to land and ancestry. Pauline's narration, however, becomes increasingly fragmented as she internalizes Catholic discipline and settler ideology. Her sections are marked by bodily anxiety, spiritual extremism, and interpretive instability. Yet Erdrich does not portray Pauline merely as unreliable in a conventional literary sense. Her fractured consciousness reflects the psychological disorientation produced through colonial assimilation. Narrative instability in *Tracks* therefore becomes inseparable from epistemological conflict.

This tension appears most clearly in Pauline's descriptions of Fleur Pillager. Fleur rarely defines herself directly; instead, readers encounter her through Pauline's contradictory observations shaped by fascination, resentment, fear, and desire. Erdrich deliberately withholds explanatory certainty surrounding Fleur's relationship to Matchimanito Lake and Ojibwe cosmology. As a result, the novel resists colonial demands for fixed interpretation. Mystery emerges not through sensational supernatural revelation but through narrative mediation itself. Readers experience Fleur through unstable perception, exposing the limitations of rational frameworks incapable of fully comprehending Indigenous spiritual knowledge.

Nanapush's narration offers a different relationship to storytelling and remembrance. Much of his voice is directed toward Lulu, transforming narration into an act of intergenerational preservation. He speaks not simply to recount events but to sustain familial continuity through memory itself. Repetition, conversational intimacy, humor, and narrative digression give his storytelling the cadence of oral tradition. Erdrich therefore reshapes the

written novel form through Indigenous modes of remembrance rooted in relational exchange rather than detached historical documentation.

A similarly recursive structure organizes *The Round House*, where Joe narrates the events surrounding Geraldine's assault from an adult perspective. The narrative repeatedly shifts between recollection and emotional re-experiencing, unsettling distinctions between remembered past and narrating present. Certain moments recur with altered emotional intensity, especially scenes associated with fear, helplessness, and juridical frustration. Cathy Caruth (1996) argues that trauma often returns through repetition because violent experience cannot be fully assimilated into ordinary chronology. Erdrich incorporates this temporal disruption formally through Joe's reflective narration, where memory repeatedly interrupts narrative progression.

At the same time, *The Round House* refuses to define Indigenous life exclusively through violence. Joe's narration remains shaped by friendship, adolescent humor, curiosity, and desire alongside grief and anger. Scenes involving Joe and his friends create moments of warmth that interrupt the novel's atmosphere of legal and emotional strain. These tonal shifts are formally important because they preserve the complexity of communal life beyond colonial injury alone. Erdrich avoids reducing Native experience to ethnographic suffering by foregrounding ordinary intimacy alongside institutional violence.

Narrative withholding also becomes politically significant in *The Round House*. Information surrounding Geraldine's assault emerges gradually through fragmented testimony, silence, and partial disclosure. Readers encounter the crime through uncertainty rather than immediate clarity, mirroring Joe's incomplete understanding of both the assault and the legal structures surrounding it. This fragmented circulation of knowledge reflects the instability produced through colonial jurisdiction itself. Settler law repeatedly generates confusion, procedural delay, and institutional absence, leaving characters suspended within unresolved uncertainty.

Despite these conditions, storytelling throughout both novels remains tied to communal endurance. In *Tracks*, oral narration preserves memory against allotment and religious assimilation. In *The Round House*, conversations among family members, elders, and friends sustain emotional continuity amid legal fragmentation and trauma. Memory consequently functions not as static recollection but as lived relational practice carried through speech, ceremony, humor, and shared experience.

Erdrich's treatment of time further challenges colonial historiography that positions Indigenous cultures within the past. Temporal movement in these novels is cyclical and recursive rather than progressive and linear. Ancestral knowledge continues to circulate through storytelling, sacred spaces, and communal interaction. The past remains dynamically present within everyday life instead of sealed within historical distance.

Through layered narration, recursive temporality, and oral storytelling structures, Erdrich transforms literary form into a space where Indigenous memory and communal identity remain active despite colonial disruption. Both *Tracks* and *The Round House* reject narratives of disappearance by sustaining relationships among memory, ceremony, kinship, and land within storytelling itself. Narrative therefore becomes a living practice through which Indigenous histories continue to inhabit the present beyond the pressures of colonial containment.

Conclusion

Through *Tracks* and *The Round House*, Louise Erdrich reconfigures colonial violence not as a

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completed historical event but as an ongoing structure that continues to shape Indigenous land, memory, law, and communal life. Yet her fiction consistently refuses narratives of disappearance that have historically organized settler representations of Native existence. Instead, Erdrich constructs literary worlds in which ancestral knowledge, storytelling, spiritual relationships, and communal bonds remain active despite the pressures of allotment, legal fragmentation, religious assimilation, and institutional neglect.

In *Tracks*, colonial intrusion threatens Ojibwe life through environmental dispossession and epistemological disruption. Land is never represented as passive territory; it functions as a living relational presence tied to kinship, spirituality, and collective memory. Through Fleur Pillager's connection to Matchimanito Lake and Nanapush's acts of storytelling, the novel resists colonial systems that attempt to separate Indigenous identity from ecological space. Haunting in the novel consequently emerges through the persistence of spiritual and ancestral presence within the landscape rather than through Gothic estrangement or absence.

The Round House shifts this examination toward the institutional realities of modern reservation life, particularly the legal vulnerabilities produced through fragmented jurisdictional authority. Geraldine's assault exposes the failures of settler law to protect Indigenous women while revealing how colonial violence continues to operate through bureaucratic structures and weakened tribal sovereignty. At the same time, the novel foregrounds forms of emotional and communal endurance sustained through kinship, storytelling, humor, and ceremonial memory. Trauma in the novel remains unresolved, yet Indigenous life continually exceeds the juridical systems designed to contain it.

Across both novels, Erdrich's narrative structures become central to this resistance. Fragmented chronology, recursive memory, shifting narration, and oral storytelling rhythms disrupt linear colonial historiography that confines Indigenous cultures to the past. Time in these texts moves relationally rather than progressively, allowing ancestral memory and communal experience to remain dynamically present within contemporary life. Literary form itself therefore becomes an enactment of Indigenous continuity.

Erdrich's treatment of haunting ultimately challenges Western theoretical frameworks that define spectrality primarily through absence, repression, or psychological fragmentation. In these novels, haunting functions through relational persistence. Memory circulates through land, sacred space, storytelling, and communal consciousness, ensuring that colonial violence never achieves total erasure. Spectral presence consequently becomes inseparable from Indigenous epistemologies grounded in reciprocity, ancestry, and collective endurance.

By linking ecological dispossession, juridical instability, and narrative form, Erdrich demonstrates that colonialism operates simultaneously through material, psychological, and institutional structures. Yet her fiction also insists that Indigenous communities continue to sustain systems of memory and belonging that exceed colonial containment. *Tracks* and *The Round House* therefore transform storytelling into a space where historical violence is confronted without allowing it to define the totality of Indigenous existence. Through this literary vision, Erdrich reimagines haunting as an enduring expression of Indigenous presence within landscapes, histories, and communal relationships that settler colonialism repeatedly attempts, but ultimately fails, to erase.

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