Trickster Narratives of the New World: Erdrich, Dorris, Columbus

MADSEN, Deborah Lea

Abstract
The trickster figure, the shape-shifting, healing culture-hero Nanabozho, is central to Anishinaabe culture and the writings of contemporary writers of Anishinaabe descent, such as Louise Erdrich and Gerald Vizenor. In the introduction to Narrative Chance (1989), for example, Vizenor writes: "The trickster is a communal sign in a comic narrative; the comic holotrope (the whole figuration) is a consonance in tribal discourse. Silence and separation, not monologues in social science methodologies, are the antitheses of trickster discourse" (emphasis in original, 1989, 9). Others, like the Anishinaabe scholar Lawrence W. Gross, place the trickster directly at the heart of efforts to ensure tribal cultural survival. In this essay, I want to analyze the role of trickster discourses in response to the impact of colonization in Louise Erdrich's fiction, with a particular focus on the novel she co-authored with Michael Dorris, The Crown of Columbus (1991) and their subsequent writing for young adults, specifically the children's narratives dealing with the period of first contact with Europeans, such as Dorris's Morning Girl [...]

Reference

Available at:
http://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:87784

Disclaimer: layout of this document may differ from the published version.
Trickster Narratives of the New World: Erdrich, Dorris, Columbus

Deborah L. Madsen

Survivance stories honor the humor and tragic wisdom of the situation, not the market value of victimry...
Gerald Vizenor, Postindian Conversations

The trickster figure, the shape-shifting, healing culture-hero Nanabozho, is central to Anishinaabe culture and the writings of contemporary writers of Anishinaabe descent, such as Louise Erdrich and Gerald Vizenor. In the introduction to Narrative Chance (1989), for example, Vizenor writes: "The trickster is a communal sign in a comic narrative; the comic holotrope (the whole figuration) is a consonance in tribal discourse. Silence and separation, not monologues in social science methodologies, are the antitheses of trickster discourse" (emphasis in original, 1989, 9). Others, like the Anishinaabe scholar Lawrence W. Gross, place the trickster directly at the heart of efforts to ensure tribal cultural survival. In this essay, I want to analyze the role of trickster discourses in response to the impact of colonization in Louise Erdrich's fiction, with a particular focus on the novel she co-authored with Michael Dorris, The Crown of Columbus (1991) and their subsequent writing for young adults, specifically the children's narratives dealing with the period of first contact with Europeans, such as Dorris's Morning Girl (1992), Guests (1995) and Sees Behind Trees (1996), as well as Erdrich's The Birchbark House (1999) and The Game of Silence (2005). These texts are quite different from the narratives published under Erdrich's name alone. For example, her close attention to tribal Anishinaabe histories, language, culture, and ritual are supplanted by a pan-Indian focus in the narratives that carry Dorris's name. To what extent, then, can we discover an Anishinaabe trickster aesthetic at work in these narratives? This is an important question because the structural weaknesses perceived by some reviewers in The Crown of Columbus have been rationalized by scholars like Susan Farrell who invoke the trickster figure to account for the narrative's distinctive style. Where Farrell deploys the trickster in a postmodern aesthetic context, I want to study the ways in which trickster discourses operate in the context of historical trauma. Nanabozho is a comic, healing force in Anishinaabe narratives; however, not all shape-shifting, deconstructive discourses are trickster discourses and these faux-tricksters may be available for conservative and destructive forms of appropriation that perpetuate the traumatic conditions of Native American experience.

The Crown of Columbus is the narrative in the Erdrich canon where these issues converge most obviously. Connie A. Jacobs, in her introductory survey of Erdrich's work in the MLA volume Approaches to Teaching the Works of Louise Erdrich (2004), refers to the novel as "the story of Professor Vivian Twostar and Roger Williams, whose search for a lost

---

1 This essay draws on my earlier work, "On Subjectivity and Survivance: Re-reading Trauma through The Heirs of Columbus and The Crown of Columbus," in Survivance, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), pp.67-81.
diary of Christopher Columbus reads like a script for a B-grade movie" (Jacobs in Sarris et al., 2004, 16). This assessment is typical of the negative critical reception of the book. Susan Farrell, in her recuperative essay on the novel, provides an acute summary of its initial reception, which is worth recalling at length:

Michiko Kakutani, in her New York Times review, wrote that The Crown of Columbus leaves behind the "recurrent themes" of both Erdrich's and Dorris's previous fiction: "the rewards and costs of familial love; the growing rootlessness of contemporary America, and the dilemmas of American Indians caught on the margins of a changing society." She argues that "whereas Ms. Erdrich's and Mr. Dorris's earlier novels cut back and forth among several generations to create a nearly mythic sense of the past, The Crown of Columbus is almost willfully contemporary.... The book lacks the strange visionary magic of The Beet Queen and A Yellow Raft in Blue Water, and as a result, never makes the leap into hyperspace of myth and fable" (25). David Finkle of The Village Voice added that, because in the past, Dorris and Erdrich have "assumed responsibility for acquainting readers with the social and psychological tragedies afflicting Native Americans," he, like the novel's controversy-hungry Dartmouth editor who "orders" Vivian to write the Columbus article, expected "a white-hot revisionist put-down of the anniversary boy" (7). Instead, Finkle says what he got was "hokum," although "brilliant hokum," "cotton candy," although "beautifully spun." The Crown of Columbus, writes Finkle, ultimately has more in common with Jaws, The Maltese Falcon, Three Men and a Little Lady, The Abyss, and Doris Day-Rock Hudson romantic farragoes than the "great" works it bows to: those of Mark Twain and Joseph Conrad and, most important to Finkle, Dances With Wolves (7). Robert Houston in the New York Times Magazine agrees with the general assessments of Kakutani and Finkle, writing that "the magic that each [author] exhibited in earlier books ... fails them here, as if the combination of two powerful potions has resulted in a third, far less potent one" (10). ... [T]he reviewers' emphasis on myth, on lofty, tragic themes, may have the dangerous side effect of reinscribing a romanticized, noble savage view of Indians that removes them from a real, practical world where political change is possible and renders them "harmless" (Farrell, 121).

However, we have to ask ourselves what kind of literary approach to the subject of Columbus is worth $1.5 million to the mainstream US media? And to what extent can Erdrich and Dorris, who emerge from Farrell's survey as having earned a reputation (no matter whether that reputation is deserved) as providers of mythic, tragic, romanticized images of Native people, now transform their style to generate critique in place of "harmless" representations? Susan Farrell defends the novel against its hostile initial reviews by describing it as a postmodern narrative. She argues that the celebration of multiculturalism by Erdrich and Dorris must be seen as: "... a conscious strategy, one that not only reminds readers that Indians and contemporary Americans are not mutually exclusive groups but also presents an irreverent, trickster-like mixing of cultures as the key to the survival of Native Americans"

---

(Farrell, 121). But can the representation of "Indians and contemporary Americans" as sharing a common humanity be reconciled with "an irreverent, trickster-like mixing of cultures"?

Farrell's representation of "Indians" as distinct from "contemporary Americans" is in itself suspect, as is the assumption that Native and mainstream cultures "mix" on equal terms. There is a dangerous, unspoken liberal bias in this formulation that assumes every human possesses an innate and sovereign selfhood but this bias does not recognize the long and painful history that denies Native people precisely this sovereign human selfhood. I wish to take a different stance, to argue that it is in the interstices that separate the trickster from "trickster-like" discourses that the distinction between Erdrich's work and Dorris's, between survival and survivance, between Anishinaabe cultural difference and a pan-Indian, assimilative multiculturalism, is to be located. The context of historical trauma, so central and inescapable in Native American Literature, can help us to identify these interstices and their significance.

OF TRAUMA AND TRICKSTER

Louis Owens, in an essay that explicitly evokes Michael Dorris's co-authorial role in the development of Erdrich's fiction, "Erdrich and Dorris's Mixed-bloods and Multiple Narratives," perceptively highlights an aspect of the narratives that accounts, on the one hand, for the technical virtuosity and power of the texts and, on the other hand, for the suspect popularity that culminates in the disappointment reviewers expressed upon the publication of *The Crown of Columbus*. Commenting on the mixed-blood "between worlds" condition that provides the background and cultural environment for much of the fiction, he writes:

> The seemingly doomed Indian or tortured mixed-blood caught between worlds surfaces in Erdrich's fiction, but such characters tend to disappear behind those other, foregrounded characters who hang on in spite of it all, who confront with humor the pain and confusion of identity and, like a storyteller, weave a fabric of meaning and significance out of the remnants (Owens in Wong, 2000, p. 55).

The technique of discontinuous and multiple narrative is identified by Owens as the motive for the narratives' emphasis not upon individual suffering but "the greater anguish of lost communal/tribal identity and the heroic efforts of a fragmented community to hold on to what is left" (55). As a consequence, narrative technique keeps individual anguish at bay, and at a distance from the reader, he argues: "Deracination is the crucible in which identities are both dissolved and formed, but the suffering is kept at a distance through the constantly shifting narrative and surface complexity of the text. ... But the non-Indian reader is not made to feel acutely, as he or she is in other Indian novels, a sense of responsibility for the conditions portrayed" (64).\(^3\)

At one and the same time then, readers may experience the cultural dislocations and profound tribal losses in the post-contact era but also place themselves as outside and beyond the causes of individual sufferings, suffering that readers are not called upon to share as a demand of narrative intelligibility. In other words, the narratives can work for readers on a more abstract level of culture where no demand is made that those readers consider their own

---

\(^3\) This interpretation of the "between worlds" motif in Erdrich's work departs quite radically from Catherine Rainwater's influential argument (1990) that the conflicting cultural codes of the narratives produce an effect of alienation in the reader. As Lawrence Gross (2005) points out, however, these are readers who are assumed to possess no personal knowledge of the historical context of genocide and land loss in which Erdrich's writing is located.
complicity in the fictional scenes presented to them. This is, perhaps, not necessarily a bad thing: certainly Erdrich and Dorris have found a large mainstream readership for their stories of deracination and the consequences of tribal decimation, a readership that may elude writers of texts that demand of readers some recognition of their complicity in the devastation suffered by Native American people. It seems to me that the important issue here is how historical trauma has been appropriated by authors like Erdrich and Dorris, and how the texts they write encourage readers to appropriate and identify with particular interpretations of tribal trauma.4

Certainly Erdrich is unambiguous in her account of how, as a contemporary Native American author, her role is shaped in fundamental ways by the traumatic history of her tribe. In the essay "Where I Ought to Be: A Writer's Sense of Place," originally published in 1985 in the New York Times Book Review, she explains in moving detail the consequences of historical trauma that are confronted by Native people every day of their lives:

In our worst nightmares, all of us have conceived what the world might be like afterward and have feared that even our most extreme versions of a devastated planet are not extreme enough. Consider, then, that to American Indians it is as if the unthinkable has already happened, and relatively recently. Many Native American cultures were annihilated more thoroughly than even a nuclear disaster might destroy ours, and others live on with the fallout of that destruction, effects as persistent as radiation – poverty, fetal alcohol syndrome, chronic despair. ...

Contemporary Native American writers have therefore a task quite different from that of other writers I've mentioned. In the light of enormous loss, they must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of the catastrophe (Erdrich, rpt. in Wong, 2000, p. 48).

This formulation, based on recognition of survival and the celebration of cultural preservation works to further the political agenda of multiculturalism which, as a response to assimilation policies, is based on the assumption that all cultures are inherently valuable and consequently worthy of the effort of preservation. However, the understanding of what cultural preservation means can easily become a process of fixing cultures in time, suspending them in an historical past that denies full participation in the contemporary political and cultural moment. In short, it can mean historical ghettoization. I do not mean to deny the importance of sustaining and nurturing what of traditional tribal lifeways has survived the catastrophe of contact; however, I do mean to emphasise the danger posed by what Gerald Vizenor calls "terminal creeds": those narratives of victimry that consign contemporary Native people to a tragic and inescapable past. It is this danger that Native writers of traumatic histories must avoid, while confronting the very real personal suffering that these histories cause.

The question then arises: how is the individual suffering highlighted by Owens, this traumatized Native subjectivity, situated in relation to the dominant American multiculture, within the context of post-contact historical trauma? I want first to outline some of the issues that arise when thinking about trauma in the historical context of post-contact America and then to turn to the specific role of the Anishinaabe trickster figure as a potentially healing force.

The most problematic issue that arises is the fact that trauma, as it is practiced and

---

4 This point is powerfully made by Lawrence Gross, in the essay cited above (n. 4), where he writes: "one of the main issues I see at work in Erdrich is not simply the survival of the Anishinaabe, but the manner in which that survival occurs" (2005, 49).
theorized, is a Western concept and one that derives largely from a history of Freudian psychoanalysis. What is problematic about these characteristics of contemporary trauma theory is highlighted by the feminist clinician Laura Brown and echoed by trauma theorists such as Kali Tal in the revised edition of her book, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*. Brown argues that the definition of trauma as belonging to a specific pathology, one that is defined within the context of patriarchal culture, obscures the fact that "normal" everyday life is experienced as traumatizing by members of oppressed groups: the poor, women, and marginalized ethnic groups including Native Americans. She argues:

> To admit that these everyday assaults on integrity and personal safety are sources of psychic trauma, to acknowledge the absence of safety in the daily lives of women and other nondominant groups, admits to what is deeply wrong in many sacred social institutions and challenges the benign mask behind which everyday oppression operates (Brown, 105).

This acknowledgement, that trauma itself is subject to appropriation by dominant discourses that serve interests other than those whose lives are most at risk, helps to explain the opinion of mental health professionals, such as Eduardo Duran, that Western therapies simply do not work in a Native American Indian context. Suicide rates among Native American people remain higher than among non-Natives, as do rates of such disorders as alcoholism, schizophrenia, psychoses, neuroses, personality disorders, and drug dependence. To return to the point made above: how trauma is appropriated, how it is used to motivate "survivor narratives," is a complicated but important issue. The "preservation" of residual tribal cultures within the context of a mainstream that is inherently traumatic cuts to the heart of trauma in Native American environments.

A further, and deeply problematic, issue that arises is the claim by influential trauma theorists that trauma itself somehow transcends the representational capacities of language. This assumption can be traced to Freud's description of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), where he accounts for trauma as a violent event that pierces the mind's protective shield, overwhelming consciousness and permanently damaging the individual's capacity to regulate the relationship between external and internal stimuli. As a consequence, traumatic events are experienced as "unspeakable" and "unrepresentable." There is also a temporal dimension to this psychic disturbance, emphasized in the work of contemporary trauma theorists such as Dominick LaCapra and Cathy Caruth. Caruth (1991) describes a "belated temporality" as characteristic of trauma: the violent event that disturbs the psyche is recognized not immediately but belatedly, in moments of involuntary remembrance that recall the traumatic past into the present. Both history and language, then, are profoundly affected by traumatic experience. However, Caruth's account of trauma assumes a linear relationship between a past trauma and a present symptom that always places trauma in the historical past and, further, that situates a linear model of history as normative. Similarly, the capacity to articulate experience in language is also posited as normative. These normative assumptions betray the cultural bias in Western definitions of trauma and reveal the danger of such definitions applied to traumatized Native individuals and communities. For the assumption that trauma must always have occurred in the past denies the experience of everyday life as traumatic for Native people; the insistence that psychic normality can be equated to linguistic expression denies Native epistemologies that assume the existence of valid non-linguistic or extra-linguistic forms of communication.

We might look to the children's fiction written variously by Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich to evaluate the relevance of these perspectives on trauma. Turning first to the assumption that trauma is located in the past, according to a linear view of history: the ending
of Dorris's first children's book, *Morning Girl* (1992) places in contrast tribal versus Western understandings of history. The narrative ends with the protagonist, Morning Girl, coming into first contact with a boat-load of strangers or "guests" as she refers to them:

I hurried up the path to our house .... As I dodged through the trees, I hoped I hadn't done anything to make the visitors leave before I got back, before we learned their names. If they were gone, Star Boy [her brother] would claim that they were just a story, just my last dream before daylight. But I didn't think that was true. I knew they were real (72).

The dramatic irony of this passage becomes clear from the epilogue that follows immediately: an extract from Columbus's diary dated October 1492, in which he describes this encounter and mentions "one quite young girl" (italic in original, 74) whom the reader recognizes as Morning Girl. This is a powerful conclusion to a narrative that has been narrated alternately by Morning Girl and Star Boy; a narrative that has dealt with loss (the miscarried baby or "little sister who did not come"); with exclusion (as when Star Boy's public display of greed causes him to be ostracized); with the importance of naming, belonging, and community. As Morning Girl hurried to inform her parents of the arrival of the strangers, she looks forward to "a special day ... by midday I was certain we would all be seated in a circle, eating steamed fish and giving each other presents" (71). Her naivete and optimism heighten the irony: Columbus's diary extract refers to the exchanging of presents but also to taking six of the Native people as gifts for the Spanish King and Queen. What allows the dramatic irony that characterizes the contrast between Morning Girl's narration and the Columbian epilogue is the position of the reader who is situated not in 1492 or in 1491 but in 1992 (or later). The reader knows the tragic consequences of this encounter but the encounter is located firmly in the historical past: "then" not "now" and our ironic perspective reinforces this temporal placement. The Western view of linear time is validated in Dorris's narrative, which locates trauma as an event that happened then, in the past.

This is not the view validated in Erdrich's novel *The Birchbark House* (1999). The European presence on traditional tribal lands is represented, in this novel, as a constant threat but one kept muted in the background of the story. Omakayah's father and his friends express concern about white encroachments on Anishinaabe lands; the pressure to force tribal people further West, which is enacted in the novel's sequel *The Game of Silence* (2005), is continually felt; however, the most dramatic incursion of white presence into the tribe is via the smallpox epidemic which threatens all of Omakayah's family and community, and kills her beloved baby brother Neewo. This is the traumatic event with which Omakayah must deal and it is an event that distills the traumatic history of the Anishinaabe into a very specific and very present act of violence that affects not just the community but, importantly, every individual within that community. This is an event that happens "now" in Omakayah's first-person narration, not "then" through a displacing technique such as Dorris's dramatic irony. And the way that Omakayah experiences trauma violates the Western understanding of psychic healing as the recovery of an articulate (and articulated), fully assimilated selfhood. Rather, Omakayah is able to accept the devastating loss of Neewo only when she rediscovers him in the voices of birds: "She heard her little brother as though he still existed in the world. She heard him tell her to cheer up and live. I'm all right, his voice was saying, I'm in a peaceful place. You can depend on me. I'm always here to help you, my sister" (italic in original, 239). This conclusion replaces a Western understanding of trauma with a tribal

---

5 Elizabeth Gargano notes that in both *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence*, through her choice of narrative structure, "Erdrich suggests that human activities can best be understood not as a progressive linear development but rather as a ritual round of profoundly necessary acts that mirror natural processes" (2006, 30).
epistemology, the same epistemology that allows Omakayah to communicate with bears and with plants, to understand her brother as both alive and dead, as both human and bird.

Erdrich's validation of multiple subjectivities invalidates the equation of mental health with a singular and self-identical subjectivity. In Western theorizing about trauma the "healed" or "surviving" self is identified as unified, self-identical, coherent, and singular. Mental "health" is signified by a reintegrated or "whole" sense of self that is assimilated to mainstream society. However, the conflation of the imperative to assimilate socially with the concept of psychic integration or assimilation poses an explicit threat both to individual self-determination for Native people and to tribal sovereignty. In the specific context of Anishinaabe history and culture, the tribal trickster figure offers an alternative response to historical trauma. As Anishinaabe scholar Lawrence W. Gross points out, in his essay "The Comic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion," a number of distinguishing features of the historical trauma experienced by Native American peoples must be recognized:

First, the stress is society-wide in nature. The stress does not simply involve a small segment of the population, as might be the case with combat veterans experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder. Instead, everyone in the culture is affected to one degree or another. Second, the stress strikes at both the personal and institutional levels. As such, some features are expressed in the lives of individual people. However, an apocalypse causes the collapse of societal institutions, which normally function to circumvent and/or minimize stress in the wake of a shock to the culture and assist in the recovery process (2002, 450).

This description echoes Erdrich's 1985 article where she likens the devastation of Native American cultures to a nuclear holocaust and the legacy for those born into post-contact Native communities as the destiny to "live on with the fallout of that destruction" (Erdrich, rpt. in Wong, 2000, p. 48). Erdrich goes on to claim a particular role for the Native American writer in the face of this catastrophic loss; in a complementary step, Gross argues that:

an understanding of the comic vision can help explain how Anishinaabe culture is recovering in the wake of what I call "Post Apocalypse Stress Syndrome." Along with many other Native American peoples, the Anishinaabe have seen the end of our world, which has created tremendous social stresses. The comic vision of the Anishinaabe is helping us overcome that trauma and helps explain how we are managing to survive (2002, 437).

In this essay and in the later 2005 work, "The Trickster and World Maintenance: An Anishinaabe Reading of Louise Erdrich's Tracks," Gross reads Louise Erdrich's comic vision as contributing to the survival of the community by playing with cultural traditions old and new, within the context of trickster narratives. Gross frames his description of the trickster around the concept of chaos, the terrible chaos brought by cultural apocalypse: he argues that "the trickster is comfortable with chaos .... Another way to phrase this is that the trickster keeps the wall between social order and chaos permeable. Chaos, then, remains accessible to human beings; in addition to being a thing of terror, chaos also becomes a treasure trove of possibility to be accessed when need be" (2005, 63). The comic vision characteristic of trickster narratives supports this creative attitude towards chaos: a toleration of ambiguity and uncertainty, together with a willingness to embrace the unfamiliar. Gross's description of the trickster is entirely in keeping with that presented by Gerald Vizenor throughout his writings. In Vizenor's account, the trickster is a force who both disrupts yet heals and balances the
world. The trickster does not resolve or remove contradiction, fragmentation or chaos, rather he holds them in balance. In Louis Owen's words, the trickster is "the fragmented culture hero made whole within memory and story" (Owens, 56). In his capacity to embrace or even to initiate change the trickster is able to bring into being new lifeways, modelled on the old: "the traditional trickster's role is not only to upset and challenge us but also to remind us -- obversely -- of who we are and where we belong" (Owens, 57).

The interpellated earthdiver creation story brings the trickster, Nanabozho, directly into the narrative of *The Birchbark House*. Omakayas tells how in winter her grandmother "told her old stories, adventures of Nanabozho, the tricky and generous teacher of the Anishinabeg, who cleverly outwitted dangerous foes and taught the Anishinaabeg to survive" (159). This story, which describes the destruction of the world by flood and the creation of a new earth by Nanabozho, using the grains of earth that the little Muskrat is able to retrieve from beneath the waters, follows the harshest of the traumatic conditions Omakaya must endure. Following the smallpox outbreak and the death of her young brother, comes a period of starvation during which time Nokomis tells the earthdiver story. The telling of this trickster narrative motivates Omakaya to bestir herself from the depression and lethargy into which she has fallen after Neewo's death. She decides that if the little muskrat can save the earth with a few grains of sand then she can search for food to save her starving family. In fact, in her weakened condition she collapses and is attacked by Old Tallow's evil-tempered dog, which is killed in retribution. This seems, on the face of it, to be an odd consequence of the trickster's survival story: it is in fact the magisterial deer "One Horn" that saves the family by presenting himself first to Nokomis in a dream and subsequently to Deydey's gun. What the two stories do have in common, however, is the dependence of human existence upon the animal world. This is a motif repeated throughout the narrative (not least in the efforts of the pet crow Andeg to build a nest with Omakaya) and throughout Erdrich's writing: we can recall the same story, of a deer sacrificing its life to starving humans, and communicating that willingness to die through a dream, in *Tracks* (1989). While the deer saves the physical lives of the family, it is Omakaya's annoying brother Little Pinch who saves their spirit. While feasting on the venison, Pinch backs up too close to the fire and sets his pants alight but, thinking quickly, he sits in the water bucket where he laughs so hard that he wedges himself firmly into the bucket. Omakaya reflects:

> Ever after that terrible winter, as though he understood from then on how important it was to be funny, Pinch gave laughter to them all. He became a joker, a trick player, and joked on himself as well as others. Perhaps it was that first saving laugh, the best thing any of them had heard since before the death of Neewo, that made him proud. He had saved his family, in a way, every bit as much as One Horn (185).

This is the comic vision of the trickster, of which Gross and Vizenor write. Pinch is, in part, responsible for their hunger because he ate the summer harvest of berries that he was entrusted to protect. Now, he restores the family's ability to laugh at the absurd. Within the context of the terrible changes that have been experienced, Pinch reminds his family that some things never change and that the forces of chaos have not triumphed over them.

**LOUISE ERDRICH, MICHAEL DORRIS, CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS**

Susan Farrell, in her account of *The Crown of Columbus*, suggests that the protagonist of the novel, Vivian Twostar, thinks of herself as a trickster-like figure because she is and can be so
many different things. Certainly Farrell is correct that central to the structure of the novel is the identification of Vivian with Columbus. But I would dispute that either of these characters represents a healing trickster figure. Vivian does not describe hers as a shape-shifting identity; rather, she sees herself as the product of the melting-pot, what she calls a "hodgepodge amalgam of hue and cry that defies easy placement" (123). She imagines a connection with the Columbus that she constructs in her mind and through her quest as another who truly belongs nowhere. Vivian reflects that perhaps it was only in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean that Columbus ever felt at home. This shared sense of a failure to belong is the basis for Vivian's projected identification with the European explorer-conqueror. This identification provides the basis for the novel's validation of post-contact history in terms of multicultural convergence rather than trickster-like divergence. For what are the characteristics that Vivian sees linking the two of them? She concedes that her desire to find the diary is motivated, like Columbus's voyage, by greed disguised as intellectual inquiry; Vivian is brought to a perception of herself as a kind of colonizing presence in Eleutheria when she reflects that "the language I used was that of another time, another place. It was the vocabulary of the colonizer. Discovery. Possession. How different was I from the construct I fabricated?" (200). So the Native woman comes to imagine herself as a reincarnation of European male colonizer. However, she distances herself from the implications of this idea when she considers that a world without a Columbus figure is impossible: "If it hadn't been Christopher [sic] it would have been somebody else at about the same time -- perhaps even somebody worse" (23).

These speculations, and the relationship between Vivian and the Columbus she imagines, are made possible because The Crown of Columbus presents us with a multicultural interpretation of American history. We may even think of this interpretation in terms of what Stanley Fish calls a "boutique multiculturalist," position on American intercultural relations. Fish uses this terms to describe an attitude towards cultural difference that articulates an appreciation of superficial ethnic differences (such as cuisine, music, and clothing) twinned with a liberal commitment to the "common humanity" of all human beings. The weakness of this concept emerges when Fish asks how incompatible cultural practices (the 1989 fatwah pronounced against Salman Rushdie by the Ayatollah Khomeini provided the immediate context for Fish's essay) are received. He concludes that all forms of multicultural tolerance have limits and that all who describe themselves as multiculturalists are, ultimately, superficial or "boutique" multiculturalists. The Crown of Columbus appeals repeatedly to a "common humanity" that unites all of us despite the superficial differences of ethnicity. Vivian's son Nash, for example, describes the world as: "a small place, all parts connected, where an Indian using an ancient Asian art can break into an old European box, witnessed by someone who grew up in Australia" (369). In this respect and as mentioned above, The Crown of Columbus seeks the timeless and cultureless "human nature" of contemporary liberal thought. This effort to project a contemporary understanding of a shared human nature on to characters from the past is addressed by Michael Dorris, in the essay "Rewriting History." In this piece, he talks about the books he was writing in the year of the Columbian quincentenary, which include The Crown of Columbus and his first young-adult novel Morning Girl. He writes of his effort to imagine the two protagonists of the latter book, these Taino characters, as what he calls "normal," "typical," "whose flaws were the flaws of youth" (1994, 143); in this way, however, Dorris projects his own image of a timeless humanity on to them. What the essay does not mention is the effort to imagine the character of Columbus, perhaps because that is substantively incorporated into the narrative through Vivian's imaginative effort.

The character of Vivian expends a great deal of energy re-imaging Columbus and the Columbus-in-herself. In contrast, she resists the request that she write for the Dartmouth alumni magazine the story of first contact told from a Native perspective. Vivian embraces a
multiculturalist approach to the events of 1492 but rejects the culturally-specific vision of Native conquest. In fact, this is the story that Michael Dorris has written in his novels for young adults, *Morning Girl* (1992) and *Guests* (1994). And this counter-narrative is indeed the story that Vivian's students learn in her class: the story of the decimation of Native communities by disease, enslavement, and war. The narrative here articulates what is essentially a pessimistic view of the differences that divide Native people from Europeans: in a simple inversion, a Native woman is portrayed as Columbus but the differences and injustices that divide still remain. Erdrich and Dorris take their protagonists to the island scene of Columbus's landing where they are placed in the position of Columbus-like conquerors: "We seemed suddenly like predators, parasites ... We had come to Eleuthera to steal away some fantasy of our own. ... What did we have to do with the pulse of life in this place?" (226). At one point Vivian imagines Roger as Columbus and herself as his mistress, Beatriz Peraza (112), but in fact the plot of the novel plays more on the Pocahontas myth, with Roger Williams as the New England Captain who requires rescue by the enamored Indian princess. This is the Disney version of the Pocahontas story, to be sure, and at one point Vivian even jokingly wonders whether Cobb sees their arrival on the island as "Pocahontas and John Smith go to Hawaii" (219).

Is the novel then offering a parody of the Pocahontas narrative of cross-cultural marriage and assimilation? Or are we to see Vivian's playful reference to the Indian Princess as a true parallel to her relationship with Roger? The novel documents in painstaking detail the strategies by which the two negotiate the complexities of selfhood within their multicultural relationship. The novel's emphasis upon multiculturalism at the expense of cultural specificity highlights the Columbus in all of us. Erdrich and Dorris take us back to 1492 to acknowledge that, in his time and place, we would have done just the same as Columbus did. This is why it is Roger who is able to complete Vivian's article on Columbus for the Dartmouth alumni magazine: the difference between him, a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant New Englander, and a Native woman such as Vivian is overtaken by the narrative's insistence upon their "common humanity." Roger can become Native just as we can become Columbus in our shared human essence. This multicultural "mixing of cultures" culminates, in the image of a house of many nations, like the one Vivian and Roger build at the novel's end. This house, where each family member has a space in which to be different, symbolizes the happy ending for these protagonists. But in this house there is no real appreciation of cultural difference: Roger tolerates Vivian's Navajo chili and Vivian tolerates Roger's musical preferences but her Native grandmother will live in an add-on room where Roger does not have to listen to her. Difference is tolerated for the sake of a "common humanity" that Roger articulates: "Human nature is no different now than it has ever been: the present is a sponge that sucks history dry" (375). Roger's is the last of the named narrative segments but the final voice, like the first, is an anonymous third-person voice. In this way, the novel is framed by the voice of "humanity."

The connection between "common humanity" and survival is made explicit in Dorris's essay "Rewriting History," mentioned above, where he argues: "We all descend from the same primordial roots -- no living human boasts a lineage more ancient than another's and, conversely, all living human beings are equally 'modern.' We are each of us, one way or another, survivors ..." (Dorris, 1994, 136). Against this commonality of all human cultures and histories Dorris compares the exclusion of particular groups. He uses the metaphor of unwelcome guests to describe this exclusion of non-elite cultural groups (such as Native

---

6 It is important to note that, with the exception of *The Crown of Columbus*, every novel that carries Erdrich's name is set within a highly-specified Anishinabeb context. In this novel, Vivian describes her ethnicity in pan-Indian terms. The characters of Dorris's fiction are ethnically diverse: for example, the characters of *Morning Girl* are Taino, those of *Sees Behind Trees* are Powhatan.
A population displaced of its rightful temporal depth is instantly transformed into an assemblage of interlopers, beneficiaries, guests at a stranger's table. Even if they've lately been welcomed to the feast, their participation is hampered by the message that they've made no valuable contribution toward its preparation. The implication is that dinner is a sit-down, formal affair and not a potluck where everyone brings his or her own special creation, the product of secretly perfected recipes, handed down through generations (136).

Not coincidentally, the children's novels he published around this time also take up the imagery of unwelcome guests: most obviously *Guests* (1994) but also in the unidentified marauding strangers of *Sees Behind Trees* (1996) and Columbus himself in *Morning Girl* (1992).

The interpellated story, "How the People Lost Each Other," which Moss's mother tells to entertain the unwelcome visitors in *Guests*, engages these ideas of entitlement and exclusion, within the context of a common humanity historically split into different groups. Moss describes this story as one "that was offered to guests to make them feel as if they weren't truly strangers but simply cousins from another clan who had come at last to visit their relatives" (92). However, the story is received rather differently. The story begins with all of humanity living together but needing to move in search of food and other natural resources; however, when they reach a frozen river the grandmother Can't Say No allows her over-indulged granddaughter, Never Enough, to pull from the ice the forbidden deer antler. The result is the breaking of the ice, the separation of those approaching the river from those who had already crossed, and the disappearance of Can't Say No and Never Enough as they float away on a small island of ice. Though Moss's father identifies the people left stranded and unable to cross the river as the ancestors of the unwelcome European guests, his grandfather suggests that they are the descendants of Never Enough, the girl who is never satisfied and whose appetite in insatiable. This view is reinforced by the story that Moss's mother tells, in response to the stranger's largely comprehensible speech. Her story, "The Beaver and the Muskrat Woman," surprises Moss because it is no longer comical. He reflects, "Perhaps it was the presence of their guests, who expected us to do everything for them and gave back little in return. They made us see ourselves as more like the too-helpful beaver than we would have liked" (112). If we view this story in the context of the lesson Moss learns during his time in the forest, that "you are who you are" then the prospects for inter-cultural relations are not promising. The strangers are as demanding and ungiving as they are; nothing will change that. But this is, again, what readers already know from their historical positioning. We know what has happened in the centuries intervening between this contact period and now. The traumatizing history instigated "then" is displaced away from "now." The distance separating "us" from "them," "then" from "now" operates as a mechanism of disavowal, as does the "common humanity" that divides even as it joins.

In *The Crown of Columbus*, and in Michael Dorris's children's novels that followed, the fictional validation of American multiculturalism and the "Columbus-in-us-all" might represent for Western readers a comforting Native literary response to the Columbian quincentenary and the devastating trauma that ensued for Native communities in the Americas. In making this judgment we must, however, also make a distinction between the work attributed to Dorris and Louise Erdrich's work. Tom Matchie, in his essay "Collaboration in the Works of Erdrich and Michael Dorris: A Study in the Process of Writing" (in Sarris et al. 147-157), provides an incisive account of the grounds upon which
we can distinguish between the two writers. And this distinction is perhaps even clearer within the context of their treatment of "contact" narratives and post-Columbian trauma. Dorris's pan-tribal view endorses a broadly multicultural interpretation of post-contact history; in contrast, Erdrich's trickster narratives do not seek to appropriate a history of trauma in the interests of "humanity" but rather are grounded in the tribal specifics of Anishinaabe culture, history, and epistemology. In The Birchbark House and The Game of Silence, as in her adult novels, Erdrich gives us trickster narratives that write, out of the traumatic devastation of traditional Anishinaabe lifeways, a new world that is not the "New World."

WORKS CITED


Farrell, Susan, "Colonizing Columbus: Dorris and Erdrich's Postmodern Novel," Critique, 40. 2 (Winter 1999), pp. 121-.

Fish, Stanley, "Boutrique Multiculturalism or Why Liberals are Incapable of Thinking about Hate Speech," Critical Inquiry, 23 (Winter 1997), pp. 378-95.


Owens, Louis, "Erdrich and Dorris's Mixed-bloods and Multiple Narratives" in Louise Erdrich's "Love Medicine": A Casebook, ed. Hertha D. Sweet Wong (New York:
Rainwater, Catherine, "Reading Between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich," American Literature, 62. 3 (1990), pp. 405-422.