

The Real of Nature and the Cultural Imaginary: A Reflection on Human's Relationship with Nature in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*

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But once the bureaucrats sink their barbed pens into the lives of Indians, the paper starts flying, a blizzard of legal forms, a waste of ink by the gallon, a correspondence to which there is no end or reason.

--Erdrich, *Tracks* (225)

I

In this paper I attempt to use the terms "the real" and "the symbolic" elaborated by Žižek to illuminate human's relationship with nature in a progressively denaturalized world. The tripartite tropes, the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic, set the frame for an account about humans' interaction with nature. While this paper is evidently charged with psychoanalytical hypotheses, the middle term-the imaginary-is not construed accordingly as a fictional self-image. Instead, I endorse a functional perspective and treat the imaginary as the effectual result of an imaginative involvement and an affective mediation between the real and the symbolic. With this understanding I read Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, and discuss the drastic changes that happen to the Chippewa Indians before and after the destruction of Matchimanito Lake Woods. The ending of the magic era of the Chippewa reservation and those tribal people's submission to symbolic domination are the major issues to be treated in the paper. These Chippewa Indians' stories epitomize what happens at large in the world at different times or in different ways less perceptible and dramatic.

Nature retreats from our civilized world day by day. It is more and more excluded from our everyday conscious life. Nature's physical death is exemplified in the extermination of species and the disappearance of rainforests. Furthermore nature's influence on cultural imagination is also vastly dwindling. Contemporary cultural studies reverse from what used to be believed as natural, and subject our understanding of reality to the discourse of cultural construction. All in all nature ceases to be the reality of our conscious life, the criterion we look up to, and becomes "the real" we live with unconsciously.

"Nature does not exist" when the symbolic order takes the full sway, Žižek puts it hyperbolically (*Looking Awry* 34). In a way the ecological crisis today is the "answer of the real" to human encroachment upon nature. The symbolic order knows not its limitation, and pushes what is against its grain to the edge, to the margins. Left alone beyond our conscious life, nature,

however, operates no less vehemently by itself. When it does break out, and vents its dammed up energy, our symbolic reality is shocked and jolted to the recognition of the real. The disturbed, derailed course of nature, which resists to be organized by the symbolic order, challenges "our understanding of 'nature' as a regular, rhythmic process" (*Looking Awry* 34).

Whatever is not organized by the symbolic order is resigned to the realm of the real. The real resists the totalization of the symbolic. In Žižek words:

The Real is therefore simultaneously both the hard, impenetrable kernel resisting symbolization and a pure chimerical entity which has in itself no ontological consistency. . . . it is something that persists only as failed, missed, in a shadow, and dissolves itself as soon as we try to grasp it in its positive nature. . . . this is precisely what defines the notion of traumatic event: a point of failure of symbolization, but at the same time never given in its positivity-it can be constructed only backwards, from its structural effects. (169)

The real embodies the lack in the symbolic order. It is a traumatic place, which causes a series of failure of the system. This presymbolic condition is endowed with a primeval life force of its own, all the more vigorous and unpredictable when strictly pressed. The real of nature, falling out of the focus of the symbolic order, would look like a "formless grey flux" out there, "pulsing slowly as if with inchoate life" (*Looking Awry* 14).

The real is the fissure in the symbolic edifice, and from time to time this "extra-terrestrial" unnamable thing erupts in some spectacular form, and discloses the frailty of the symbolic construction. When it comes to the eruption of the real of nature, the outcome is manifested in the form of natural catastrophes or environmental disasters. Žižek takes the event of the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown as an example to exemplify the intrusion of the real. The expert could not determine what the exact consequence of the meltdown would be, and the public did not know what to anticipate from it. The radiation continued to expand, but there was no prediction of the rays, even no adequate image to represent it. We did not see or feel the rays so that people paradoxically responded with either unreasonable panic or indifference while everyday life simply followed its course (*Looking Awry* 36). The real of nature is like the rays: it is there but we do not see or feel it. The real of nature stands side by side with us in everyday life, and yet we are unconscious of its great potential ready to erupt when we least expect it. The very ground of our being would be shaken once we encounter it.

The real may not always be "a disgusting reject" or "a sublime, charismatic apparition," as Žižek describes, in relation to the symbolic (*Sublime* 143). The opposition between the real and the symbolic may not be as nervous and stressful in some societies in which the real may find ways to participate in our everyday life. Only when the symbolic order operates as the only truth and appropriates the real's place, will the real be suppressed and become highly provocative and eruptive. The return of the repressed real bewilders us and confounds our sensibility like a *deja-vu*, strange and yet not entirely unfamiliar. The more the real and the symbolic function as two incommunicable opponents, the worse the reaction. By *Tracks* I put forth an alternative model in which the real is channeled by human's imaginative involvement and maintains an imaginary but effective/affective place in everyday reality. In *Tracks*, with the imaginary/imaginative mediation on personal and collective basis, the characters experience the aspect of nature as real in a dreamlike rather than nightmarish condition. The real of nature is as mysterious and

unpredictable as ever; however, nature in this respect is managed to be intelligible, comprehensible, and communicable through cultural imaginaries.

The imaginary approached in this sense, other than that in Žižek's inquiry, indicates an active human involvement with the unknown, and the effort to communicate an "other" world in a highly imaginative way. In exploring the cultural imaginary, Moira Gatens turns to Spinoza for a study of imagination. For Spinoza, to know something by imagination is "to exist in a particular way in relation to one's context," and to know something by this way is no less valid than by reason. This, in turn, will "affect one's ability to act as well as one's capacity to be acted upon" (Gatens 127). Gatens cites Spinoza's example of our relationship with the sun to illustrate this point:

When we look at the sun, we imagine it to be about 200 feet away from us. In this we are deceived so long as we are ignorant of its true distance; but when its distance is known, the error is removed, not the imagination [since this imagination is] not contrary to the true, and do[es] not disappear on its presence. . . . The nature of my imaginary grasp of these bodies will depend upon how they affect me--do they increase or diminish my power of acting? . . . Just as there is a vast difference between the sun *per se* and the sun as it affects my present bodily constitution (does it warm me? Burn me?), so too can one distinguish between the general nature. . . . Such understanding does not cancel out any imaginary relation which I may have towards it. (qtd. in Gatens 146)

Imagination is as necessary to our getting to know the world. The affective imaginary is as effective as anything substantial, and is indispensable for a system that allows the flow between the real and the symbolic. The imaginary, understood in this sense, together with the real and the symbolic, offers a critical model to approach *Tracks* as follows.

II

Louise Erdrich's works are informed with the themes of survival, the visionary experience, and transpersonal relationships. Like many contemporary Native American writers, Louise Erdrich examines the Indians' dislocation from their heritage and their environments. *Tracks*, Erdrich's third novel, evokes an earlier moment of crisis on the Indian reservation in the early twentieth century. It tracks a lost world in which humans maintain a fantastically imaginary relationship with their material world. The destruction of such a fantastic world signals the end of an Indian magic era, and the ascension of symbolic dominance. It chronicles the loss of an imaginative way of living in the world to an alien representational system in which money stands for value and words take the place of things themselves. In other words, symbolic construction prevails, and the imaginary relationship with the world is thus severed and broken.

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A lusty, vivacious, and comic-tragic novel, *Tracks* turns the historical leaves back to the first decades of the twentieth century when the Chippewa Indians saw the end of their mythic era. Erdrich takes the reader back to the generation prior to *Love Medicine*, her first novel. Setting her story in the fictional Matchimanito Lake, North Dakota, Erdrich creates a mythical space where shamans, elders, Indian spiritual animals are vital parts of everyday living experience. It is a time

when the miraculous and the mundane walk hand in hand, and the practical and the fantastical are not quite differentiated. However, Indian mystics, even though endowed with supernatural power, cannot save their lands and their special way of interacting with nature. The last portion of their traditional lives slips rapidly away, lost to the new witchery of the symbolic system promoted by the white's capitalism.

The novel is composed of a series of narratives alternately told by Nanapush and Pauline. Nanapush is an elder of the tribe, who survives plagues and famines, and Pauline, a mixedblood woman, is tormented by self-hatred for not being a white. Both their narratives focus on the powerful character of Fleur, and contrast and complement each other. The novel opens with Nanapush's lamentation: "We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall" (1). The Chippewas are dying wholesale from consumption^{1}. Heralded by this elegiac mood, the novel culminates with the fall of the Matchimanito Lake Woods. In between, the text is filled with multilayered narratives about renegades and survivors, their heroic deeds and derangement.

This paper will explore the imaginary relationship between mankind and nature in *Tracks*, and the destruction of the magic era of the Chippewa Indian world. Erdrich conjures up an Indian world of mythic realism, in which the natural and the supernatural interpenetrate with fluid ease. Fleur exemplifies the power of full immersion in nature. The breach of this mutually inclusive relationship forces nature to become the repressed real and the excluded other. The symbolic takeover comes in a violent and irrevocable way. Fleur's woods launch a suicidal revolt, so to speak, against the capitalist-symbolic violation, while Nanapush learns new tricks and survives in the new system. The sagacious old man resorts to storytelling to make sense of the quantum change and to pass down the tribal legacy. *Tracks* depicts dramatically the paradigm shift from imaginary relatedness to symbolic domination.

III

In *Tracks*, which highlights the importance of spirituality for the Anishinabe-an ancient name for the Chippewa-as well as for the Native American cultures, Fleur Pillager embodies a syncretism with natural force. She serves as a repository of the Native American tradition of physical immersion in the natural surroundings. Spirituality is a trait typical of many Native American literatures, modern or traditional; and with Fleur, such an Indian legacy finds a new expression. Like *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, *Tracks* not only recalls traditional myths but also retells them to meet the challenges of the times (Friedman 108). Erdrich combines traditional elements and recasts them in a new mold with added ingredients and shifted perspectives. In the reinvention of a tribal heroine, Fleur transgresses age-old traditional myths, and brings together the essences of the bear, the wolf, Misshepesu (the Water Man), the gambler, and shamanistic sorcery into a new expression of tribal imagination. The new combinations are necessary for a revitalization of cultural creativity, to explain their way of being there and then, to understand what they have lost, and to imagine a different future in response to the mainstream culture.

Fleur is active in the imaginative world of Chippewa Indians, a world of walking spirits, tribal medicines, chants and curses. She is totally immersed in such a world in which all things have their own lives and affect each other. In this Chippewa landscape nature plays a functional role, sometimes benevolent, sometimes vicious. As it can be benevolent, so can it be threatening to human life. It causes death as it gives life. Life is hard, and taxes a lot of wits and strength. Nature may induce fear, but it is not a nightmare monstrous and unrecognizable to humans.

The magic is created when the two worlds, the human and the non-human, come in touch with each other through Fleur's agency. Fleur maintains an intense connection with nature; she is the major passageway through which transaction with nature is conducted. This attribute is best epitomized in the two birthing scenes described in the novel. In the first case Fleur has a hard time delivering Lulu. She has been in labor for over a whole day, but nothing is heard from her. When Fleur's cries finally break the stillness, all animal spirits seem to give voice through her: "[I]t was as if the Manitous all through the woods spoke through Fleur, loose, arguing. . . . Turtle's quavering scratch, the Eagle's high shriek, Loon's crazy bitterness, Otter, the howl of Wolf, Bear's low rasp" (59). At the critical moment, the bear does come, perhaps at Fleur's summoning. On seeing the bear, Fleur gives birth right away, filled with fear and power.

The birthing scene is mixed with comedy and realism; yet it still is awesome and mystic, and commands feelings of wonder. The bear's hilarious appearance brings commotion to everybody. The bear creates a mess since she has stolen Nanapush's wine hidden in Fleur's woods and is drunk. The ferocious animal scares all the people there; however, they have a dreamlike experience while dealing with the bear. The bear gives Nanapush a long stare, which renders him wet, cold and stiff. Passing Nanapush by, the bear heels Margaret like "a puppy," but when Margaret tries to bar it from getting into the cabin, it swats her aside with one sharp "dreamlike" blow (60). It rears on hind legs when ambling into the house. The human and nonhuman worlds are drawn close to each other in this unconventional episode of the bear's intrusion into Fleur's birthing scene. The cultural convention of a heroic birth accompanied with a spiritual animal is rewritten in such a way that the tension of a human relationship with nature is highlighted while its imaginary and mythic elements are still conspicuously present. What could have developed into a high-flown version of legendary pomposity is humorously humanized with its fantastic quality intact.

In the second case Fleur has a miscarriage, and she meddles with Death's business in order to win back her children. It happens in a deadly freezing winter night. Fleur is in great danger, and little Lulu sets off for help with her new moccasins on while Pauline falls into a stupor as she always does when Fleur is facing an emergency. In a trance Pauline follows Fleur outdoors heading west. Barefooted, Fleur glides on until she meets three butchers killed in Argus. She gambles with them as they used to do in the old days, but this time they bet on Lulu's and the unborn baby's life. Fleur loses the first round. "[H]unched and drawn as an old witch woman, lean as a half-dead wolf, and desperate," Fleur wins the next round with four queens and a jack (162). Lulu is snatched back from Death, but not the baby.

These two episodes demonstrate Fleur's close relationship with nature as manifested in her

special ties with animals and matters of life and death. This relationship is multi-dimensional, neither exclusively harmonious nor solely conflictive. In the first case, the female bear bespeaks Fleur's personality and character and her capacity of natural power. The narrative identifies Fleur with the bear in an ambiguous way. When Nanapush recounts to Lulu the story of her birth, he starts with regret and says, "we shot the last bear, drunk, on the reservation" (58). Pauline fills the bear's heart with gun lead, and according to her version of the story the bear only gains strength from the shots. The bear whirls and goes away, leaving no trail, and is seen no more. Fleur's affiliation with the bear is, furthermore, endorsed by the fact that she belongs to the Pillager family, members of the bear clan. Endowed with bear power, Fleur makes a powerful medicine woman, and effects wonderful cures. When in the end the white's commercialism and technology break in to take over her woods, she mobilizes a total counterattack, and finally recedes into the wilderness like a lone bear.

In the second case Fleur sails in the cold dark night, and journeys to the afterworld to gamble for her children's life. She negotiates between life and death. Carrying the baby in her body, Fleur is the sign of reproduction incarnated. She is performing the important natural function of bringing life to the world. Death is also an inevitable component of the natural cycle, and by challenging Death to the poker game, Fleur wins Lulu's life in a very comic, and also very symbolic, way. Death, which however humans try to contain in the symbolic order, belongs basically to the realm of the unknown, and thus is part of the real. Death in *Tracks* is an especially powerful expression of natural force since many deaths result from natural mishaps, such as disease, famine, drowning, tornado, etc. Poker is used to decide the bet of life against death; the symbolic system of the game with its numbers and patterns unexpectedly serves as an imaginary means in dealing with the old Death in nature. The symbolic traffics with the real through an imaginary connection, and the convention of bargaining for one's life and death by games is continued in a revised way. The imaginary interaction with nature evolves, and is still kept alive.

IV

Nanapush, like Fleur, is highly capable of crossing the boundaries between the natural and the human worlds. As a shaman, Nanapush often relies on his visionary powers and his spiritual helpers to cure the sick and look for food. He has the special faculty of getting information revealed in dreams, and by this way he nurtures Fleur to recover from her miscarriage. In one of the hunting expeditions Nanapush reaches beyond his physical limits and leads Eli to the moose in a fantastic, imaginary way. After two days of starvation in a snowy winter, Nanapush makes Eli go hunting for food. Staying at home, he sings and calls his helpers. In a trancelike state he sees Eli dazzled by the snow. Singing on, he helps Eli track the moose, and directs the bullet to the target. The song continues to help pace Eli's steps when he walks home wrapped up with pieces of moose meat.

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In his narrative Nanapush, rather than young Eli, plays the central role in this hunting feat. Old and weak from an empty stomach, Nanapush, however, conducts the hunting in an imaginary way. Trapped in his cabin, Nanapush nevertheless demonstrates spiritual power that overcomes physical barriers. His vision reaches beyond to the outer world and his spirit stays with Eli. This is a symbiotic imagining, in which the old man Nanapush's wisdom is projected to the young

man's body. By passing messages and giving advice through telepathic music, Nanapush displays an imaginary way in which they can help each other to survive nature's severe challenge.

The episode may be read in other ways, and they still affirm the power of imagination. When taken realistically, all that Nanapush sees happens in his mind. He imagines the hunting scene in all its actuality, and in this way he is assured of his contribution to survival. The episode may also be read from the perspective of Indian cultural belief in the shamanistic arts. The collective imagining shaped by tradition and all people in the community supports Nanapush's indispensable role in the hunt. We may also look at the whole matter as a construction of narrative. In the story told, the event is created and fabricated in such a way that a world of mythic telecommunication comes into being to hold all pieces together. Patterning and knitting, Nanapush fashions the plot and gives a fantastic shape to Eli's hunting excursion.

An intimate tie is found connecting the hunter and the hunted in this episode. The two parties are exchangeable in their identities. The meat strapped to Eli's body freezes into an armor in Eli's shape. It fits Eli like tailored clothes. When severed from Eli's body, the pieces of meat stand on their own, "a moose transformed into the mold of Eli" (104). Eli is clothed in the moose; they are no longer just two separate unrelated beings as they were before they met each other. Both Eli and the moose are equal members of nature; the hunter is no higher in position than the hunted. They are closely related to each other to the extent that one may take on the identity of the other. The moose is split up and loses its shape, but Eli has experienced a transformation, too: for some moments they formed a new composite body. Both Eli and the moose live in a world made of relations. They share a collective life, in which everyone is connected.

The hunting is a joint effort for the Indians, says Winsbro. In this case Eli, Nanapush, and the moose are all taken into account to make the hunting possible. Eli performs the action; he is the actor. Nanapush serves as a "conduit" through which the voices of his spiritual helpers guide and direct the young hunter (Winsbro 53); he is the conductor. And the moose is given an active part in the hunting, not just a hunted object. When Eli takes out the moose's liver, he first slices a bit, wraps it with a piece of his shirt, sprinkles it with tobacco, and buries it under a handful of snow. According to Winsbro this is a token to express gratitude to the moose's spirit (53). Eli eats half of the remaining liver to gain strength for the hard work ahead, and saves the other half for Nanapush. Eli does not take the credit solely for himself; the spiritual helper is acknowledged and the animal is not neglected.



One of the Indian modes of imagining nature is the belief in the Manitou. Both Nanapush and Pauline call upon and refer to the Manitou repeatedly in their narratives. Fleur in her travail is said to cry in all Manitou's sounds. The bear that shows up in front of Fleur's birth bed may come from the Manitou world. The Manitou of the moose may be responsible for revealing the game animal in Nanapush-Eli's hunting.

A Manitou is "the spirit prototype of some animal, plant, or elemental force" (Winsbro 53).

There are thousands of manitous. They exist as "shape-changing non-human spirits who can inhabit many forms, including those of animals, human beings, and the elements." The Indians contact the Manitous through "dream, vision, potion, fasting, or healing ceremony" (Friedman 114). The Indians may turn to their guardian manitou when they encounter difficulty. The young Indians are encouraged to seek the vision of their guardian manitou. The vision quester performs ceremonies of fasting alone for days. The self-disciplined ritual induces hallucinatory dreams which can help him "realize his identity by revealing his spirit helpers and special animal henchmen, and which also can supply information to the tribe" (Bevis 591). The vision quest is considered the most radically isolated "knowing" for an Indian (Bevis 591).

Animals become metaphors for the relationships "that the Anishnabeg draw for themselves in balancing human needs against the unforeseeable forces of the natural world" (Brehm 678). Fleur is said to derive most of her power from the Water Man, Manitou of the Matchimanito Lake. It is a long-standing relationship, which can be traced back to Old Man Pillager's unusual connection with the spirit of the lake. Pauline, caretaker of the dead and the sick, has a kinship with the Owl, the night bird. As for Nanapush, in Friedman's opinion, he is associated with otter, the benevolent manitou of the Nanabozho, the trickster hero of Ojibwa legends, whose namesake Nanapush bears (Friedman 125).

The bear, a totem animal in the Indian world and a Manitou in *Tracks*, entices interest from various scholars. Clarke puts together relevant sources and makes a very illuminating study of the bear in her article on *Tracks*. According to anthropologist Ruth Landes, the bear is highly respected among traditional Chippewa for its mysterious qualities. It is considered "quasi-human, in anatomy, erect carriage, cradling of young with the forearms, enjoyment of sweets and liquors, manner of drinking liquid, shows of intelligence, [and] inclination to moderate behavior despite great physical strength" (qtd. in Clarke 33). Moreover, a bear's life cycle moves from hibernation in winter to reemergence in the spring, a process analogous to the alternation of death and life. In Turner's term the bear is a "liminal creature" since it possesses qualities of both human and animal, and symbolically experiences the cycle of life and death every year. This coincidence of opposites in a single creature represents a peculiar unity, "which is neither this nor that and yet both" (qtd. in Clarke 33). Barbara Babcock observes astutely that totemic creatures are singled out not because they are "good to eat" or "good to prohibit" but because they are "good to think" (qtd. in Clarke 34).

Fleur, the bear woman, likewise is ambivalent and good to think. In light of the imaginary relation of the human and nature Fleur's liminal status serves as a portal between the two worlds. Such a position is at once marginal and pivotal. Fleur is marginal in two senses: on the one hand she is located at the edge of the Indian circle, both geographically and socially. She lives far away from the community center, and her fellow tribal people keep her at elbow's distance. On the other hand Fleur is situated in the twilight zone where the human and the non-human intersect. However, precisely because she is a border character that Fleur is endowed with the privilege to make excursions to and fro in the human and non-human worlds. Those who are too near or too much occupied with the center will never reach the border, which by definition is at the margin of a territory.

Fleur is fluid in identity, and open to non-symbolic signification. She reveals the indeterminacy underlying all culturally constructed worlds. She becomes what Edmund Leach has called a "marginal creature," one of those incarnate deities, virgin mothers or supernatural monsters who are half human/half beast and are "specifically credited with the power of mediating between "logically distinct categories" such as "this world and the other world" (qtd. in Clarke 39). Being a liminal creature, Fleur is in perpetual displacement, always shifting between the symbolic and the semiotic order (in Kristeva's sense). Her anomalousness repulses her community; and yet, at the same time, her search for a way to survive fascinates them. She enjoys a freedom that is both tantalizing and disturbing to her fellow tribesmen. Boundary crossing offers her the possibilities of becoming the possessor of great knowledge and power, and a potential mediator between different categories.

Pauline's narrative invests Fleur with extraordinary powers of shape shifting. She says that Fleur is able to see things in the night like an owl, and hunts in the shape of a bear:

We know for sure because the next morning, in the snow or dust, we followed the tracks of her bare feet and saw where they changed, where the claws sprang out, the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt. By night we heard her chuffing cough, the bear cough. By day her silence and the wide grin she threw to bring down our guard made us frightened. (12)

As a medicine woman Fleur's inexplicable ability includes her powerful knowledge of herbal remedies. Fleur is so closely connected with plants and animals that she seems "an extension of the natural world" (Shaddock 112).

Fleur is an erratic woman in the tribe. She belongs to the Pillager family, members of the bear clan. Her kinspeople have been possessors of the power which "travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth" and the knowledge of "secret ways to cure and kill" (T 31, 2). She had miraculously survived drowning twice while she was young, and this encourages people to believe that she was born with supernatural powers. There are all sorts of conjectures: "Misshepeshu, the water man, the monster, wanted her for himself." "Rumor is, there's no limit to her life." As more and more trespassers on Pillager land disappear, lose their minds, or die in unusual circumstances, Fleur develops within the community the reputation of a witch. As a "witch" Fleur enjoys a freedom not available to an ordinary woman, and escapes even the Chippewa community's attempts to define her. Fleur disturbs the community by her refusal to conform to its unspoken codes. She lives alone in the spirit-inhabited woods, which even Nanapush thinks unusual. She dresses herself "like a man," and refuses to listen to "the old women's advice." She is strong and daring, and people relate her to all that is mysterious and unaccountable. As her reputation increases, so do her powers, and vice versa (Winsbro 60).

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Like Gerry, the legendary trickster hero in *Love Medicine*, Fleur never narrates. She is the subject of Nanapush's and Pauline's narratives, but she tells no story of her own. Her share is a total immersion with nature; words are oblivious to her. Language is of vital importance in the symbolic order, but is one of numerous common phenomena in a world in which "the real" still participates in the everyday life in all kinds of imaginary/imaginative ways. Erdrich energizes the marginal stories of Native Americans' life and creates a liminal agent in Fleur. Reviving Fleur's

story of ambiguous powers and transformational identity, Erdrich makes *Tracks* a novel "good to think."

V

The decline of the Indian magic era culminates in the fall of the Matchimanito Lake Woods. The episode brings the novel to a climax full of catastrophic power. The calamity serves as a demarcation for the Chippewa Indians in Erdrich's series of works. Before the disappearance of the woods, nature is part of their everyday life, and after it nature retreats to the realm of the repressed real. In the post-catastrophic world of *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*, the land is subjected to imagined development plans, such as a toy tomahawk factory or a resort casino. The Indians are pulled into the all-consuming whirlpool of the capitalist symbolic system, and gradually become alienated from the once vital source of their life.

The catastrophe of the woods envisages a hostile mode of interaction between humans and nature when the close bond is broken. The woods come to life and initiate a suicidal attack, so to speak, before they are pushed away into extinction and oblivion. Bad signs are detected in the atmosphere before the catastrophe but not correctly interpreted until the inevitable becomes visible. The last chapter of *Tracks* opens with uncertain certainty: "It began as a far-off murmur, a disturbance in the wind" (206). Unusual numbers of birds and animals flock near Fleur's cabin until one day they realize that the noises across the water on the other shore are the shouts of men, thump of steel axes, and rasping sounds of saws and ungreased wooden wheels. The truth reveals itself: the woods have been sold to the Turcot Company.

The day comes. Nanapush takes the long way to visit Fleur since Pauline has damaged his canoe. Driven by the signs of a coming storm he walks hurriedly: "among the twisted stumps of trees and scrub, the small, new, thriving grasses which had been previously shaded." He passes through "the ugliness, the scraped and raw places, the scattered bits of wood and dust," and enters "the square mile of towering oaks" around Fleur's cabin. The moment he steps into the woods, he hears "the hum of a thousand conversations;" the spirits as well as birds and small animals forced to take refuge here are busy taking leave of the woods. "The shadows of the trees were crowded with their forms. The twigs spun independently of wind, vibrating like small voices." Among the departing spirits are Nanapush's wives, children, relatives, and friends, abandoning him to the living (219-20).

The moment comes when Fleur has to confront the lumber workers. At that time Nanapush feels "the wind building on the earth," and hears "the waves begin to slap" (222). All of a sudden the trees start crashing down. The workers are caught by surprise and scared away by the trees' fearful attack. Nanapush realizes then that the woods stand on illusion: the trees are sawed through to the base and held by no more than splinters of bark. In his words: "The wind shrieked and broke, tore into the brush, swept full force upon us," and with "one thunderstroke the trees cracked off," leaving "a landscape level to the lake and to the road" (223).

Only through an afterthought in his narrative does Nanapush get a glimpse of what has happened to the woods. He recalls that when workers are pressing in toward the lake, something secretive about Fleur is also going on without anyone knowing exactly what. The pumpkins and squash Fleur grows flourish "madly, almost in defiance" (218). Woodchips litter the ground, and the smell of spilled sap of pine is strong. Cats-signs of Fleur's cousin, Moses, nearby-trail Fleur on her way back from the woods. Nanapush's stolen axe and saw in Fleur's yard imply that Fleur has resorted to personal intelligence and strength to fight the battle. It is insinuated that what Fleur is doing all this time is not making a cart but working on the trees for the last moment.

The involvement of a supernatural power is not directly affirmed. Erdrich makes it clear that a transcendent being is not in question here. Rather, amazement and wonder is derived from the crossing of the two worlds. The magic effect is rendered by a metonymic function: What power is reserved in nature is not fully known, but the unknown finds a vent through an agent like Fleur, who has frequent contacts with nature. The contiguity of Fleur and her dear woods sparks fires through the cataclysm of imagination. The lumber workers are vanquished by their willing submission of rationality to magic. The catastrophe brings about a spectacular finale to that dreamlike imaginary/imaginative relationship between humans and non-humans. The natives are estranged from their own homeland, and nature is repressed by the capitalist symbolic system to the realm of the rejected real.

The climatic scene may be subject to a realistic reading; however, it does not deprive the scene of its magic and power. Through Erdrich's arrangement, we are overwhelmed by the bewitching eruption of the natural world. The woods succumb to civilization, but in an enchanted way. Fleur's fascinating strength is ultimately that of a woman who refuses to give in, to compromise. To accomplish her final act of sorcery, Fleur relies on her own muscles and wits. When the lumber crews surround her cabin, they find themselves entrapped in a truly haunted forest, one that is "suspended, lightly held" (223). Even the vegetables, which grow wild for lacking Fleur's tending, articulate the rage and energy of the natural world. Nature and Fleur empower each other, and make a memorable denouement.

This scene evokes supernatural associations typical of the Western world that often conflates wilderness and witchery (Schweninger 41); however, the witchery is nothing more than an intimate relationship with an "other" world. The supernatural effect is implied as a natural outcome in Nanapush's narrative; and yet when contextualized in a whole set of different parameters of cultural imaginaries, the natural becomes the supernatural. Fleur's ability derives its power from her imaginary merging with the nonhuman world and the mythic tradition in which she has been brought up. The magic is created when this and other worlds get in touch with each other. Fleur stands out as a communicator between the mundane and the mythic world.

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Nature's counterattack, nevertheless, is a lost battle in the novel however sublime and spectacular it may be. This native world made up of humans and non-humans in reciprocal vicissitude is destroyed. Despite their fierce, victorious display of power, the woods collapse, the spirits leave, the animals disperse-with them the Manitous-and Misshepeshu, the Water Man, sleeps under the water. Lake Matchimanito still lies there; however, its legitimate status comes

not from itself any more, but from legal documents, from a string of words and numbers. Its right of being is severed from creatures inhabiting it or surrounding it. The capitalist symbolic way of recognition takes no account of memories, stories, and traditions formed around it, or of feelings toward it whether fear or respect. The mutual reliance developed from cohabitation is discarded.

From then on the Indian life is drastically directed to another route. "The real" of nature is subsumed by the symbolic system, and the imaginary reciprocity is much weakened. As a consequence the magic world is shattered and becomes fragmented. The Matchimanito Lake Woods' revolt demonstrates a thanatos libido circulating in an impaired nature, and it heralds the new pattern of nature's partaking in human life under the condition of symbolic domination. Nature suppressed does not disappear; it only becomes the unknown. Nature becomes the unconscious of the civilized world. Like a shadow it is overlooked but never really goes away. "The real" of nature operates no less fervently in its own course, and may intrude into the symbolic world as the return of the repressed in the manner of *deja vu*, in which the familiar is turned strange.

The dominance of the symbolic order as manifested in the way in which the money and writing system brought by the whites changes Chippewa space. It encroaches the Chippewa way of life. As Nanapush says, "once the bureaucrats sink their barbed pens into the lives of Indians, the paper starts flying, a blizzard of legal forms, a waste of ink by the gallon, a correspondence to which there is no end or reason." In the years to come they are to become "a tribe of file cabinets and triplicates, a tribe of single-spaced documents, directives, policy. A tribe of pressed trees. A tribe of chicken-scratch that can be scattered by a wind, diminished to ashes by one struck match" (225). They are shoved into what Gerald Vizenor has called "[h]yperreality of the white's construction of the tribal life for consumerism" (9).

In the traditional Indian world humans share with nature the same space, and live intimately with non-humans. Even death is trespassable; imaginary communication with the dead is part of everyday life. The spirits of friends and relatives linger in the woods around Lake Matchimanito, "chattering, gambling, occasionally appearing among the living" (Winsbro 65). The fall of the woods signals the breakup of a world maintained by collective imagination, which sustains a way of living. With fragmentation of such a spiritual world, the Indians experience a further cultural diaspora in addition to their geographic exile.

Nanapush recognizes that things have changed, and that the old ways are malfunctioning. The weakening of the old world is witnessed by the fact that Fleur's powers greatly dissipate. Her dream lies, her vision is obscured, and her connection with Misshepesu is shaky. The government supplies sent from outside, rather than her songs "chilling and cold as the dead," save the family as well as the reservation in the dead winter 1919 (171). Ultimately she fails to work miracles as she has done in the old days, and loses her family's ancestral lands to the bureaucracy. The woods are seized by the government for unpaid taxes, and sold to the lumber company. Fleur regards documents such as the map with contempt, claiming that it has "no bearing or sense, as no one would be reckless enough to try collecting for land where Pillagers were buried." However, Fleur's deep-rooted conviction does her no good as the new paradigm

takes the place of the old one. Fleur is defeated by what she despises.

Nanapush knows better that the system of words and symbol is a new alien god of unprecedented power. Realizing that it is politically necessary for him to step into the system of written discourse, Nanapush runs for government office against Pukwan, and becomes the tribal chairman. Nanapush enters into the game of governmental negotiation and policy-making. He makes use of the technology of the symbolic system and calls Lulu back from the boarding school because the church papers falsely register Nanapush as Lulu's father. Nanapush had named Lulu in memory of his own dead daughter when filing her birth certificate with Father Damien. The papers ironically become the legal document to empower Nanapush. Nanapush "grasp[s] this way of wielding influence, this method of leading others with a pen and piece of paper" (209). With his trickery, and his ability to "think like his prey" (Winsbro 80), Nanapush makes a living in the fissures of the symbolic system.

VI

Nature as imagined by the Indians is radically different from the concept in the white capitalist symbolic system, in which natural resources, such as lands, are commodities. It is even different from what is imagined by the American romantics. Indians were never wild and free, says Bevis, nor did they live in Thoreau's beloved wilderness. In Luther Standing Bear's words: "We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth as wild. Only to the white man was nature a wilderness . . . When the very animal of the forest began fleeing from his approach, then it was for us the Wild West began" (qtd. in Bevis 598).

Native American nature is "urban," in Bevis's opinion (601). "Urban" suggests dense population, complexity, and variety. For us non-Indians the natural usually designates a state opposite to the cultural. The Indian nature, far from it, is an inseparable part of their cultural space. The woods, birds, animals and humans are all busy "downtown," and in this urban nature they are often involved in a complicated power structures, in unpredictable and various relationships. The variety of personality, motivation, purpose, politics, and conversation familiar to human civilization is found throughout Indian nature (Bevis 601). Such nature is never viewed as the antithesis of the human world. Nature is part of the tribe.

A nomadic individuality does not make much sense for an Indian identity since all are connected and may find oneself in others. *Tracks* asserts a trans-individual tribal identity based on this native outlook. Fluidity between the human and the natural is especially rich for the transpersonal selfhood manifested in *Tracks*. Nature is not kept at a distance either by neglect or by respect. Intensive bonds are established through reciprocity between the human and the natural and among all the inhabitants of the natural world. One feels a symbiosis within this "ecologically" mutual definition. Nonhumans are treated as sentient beings with the capacity for knowledge, and in turn define the intelligent beings called human. Being native may thus be understood as being at home in a natural habitat.

The native's way is quite different from the American whites' colonial tradition. Colonists by and large do not have the "immediate, daily organic relationship" with their natural environment and the appreciation that such a relationship engenders (Schweninger 37). *Tracks* privileges the biosphere, which reflects Native Americans' affinity with nature. The novel's concern is echoed in the ecofeminist's affirmation that "everything is connected." The world is an organism, says Schweninger, and recognition that all parts are inextricably interrelated is necessary (39). The same patriarchal worldview that motivates the oppression of women and minorities, motivates human oppression of nonhuman nature as well (Schweninger 38). Fleur is raped in the beginning of the novel; the rape is symbolically reenacted when the lumbermen come to cut the trees on Fleur's land (Schweninger 45). Her eventual banishment from the lake at the end of the novel attests to the violence that precludes imaginary and bodily involvement in cultural formation. She is the "last bear" on the reservation. The liminal totem animal is exiled from the community, leaving only tracks.

Fleur's disappearance at the end of the novel functions as a "present absence" in the novel (Peterson 987). Her absence becomes a haunting presence in Nanapush's and Pauline's narratives. Despite her pivotal role in the novel, Fleur does no speaking for herself. Fleur's silence opens the way for interpretation and reconceptualization. Fleur is, in Shaddock's words, "intensely focused on enacting her own story, on living her own narrative reality" (118). She is a story maker rather than a talker. Fleur, an acting subject, is immersed in the forgetfulness of life making. The stories revolving around her create a space for people to trace a past that cannot be fully grasped with the discriminating logic of the symbolic era. Fleur, exiled from her land, becomes wilder than in her wayward youth, and more powerfully ephemeral than her shaman cousin, Moses. Landless and uprooted from the responsibilities and privileges of the material world, Fleur makes "a spare and mobile symbol of Native American endurance and power in the fact of long persecution" (Shaddock 118).

"In the light of enormous loss," in Erdrich's own words, Native Americans must tell the stories of contemporary survivors, of those who are gone, in order to track the path they have been through (qtd. in Owens 193). Through storytelling Pauline tries to convince, maybe herself, that she is not what she is. Her stories command our sympathy; from her we get to see how a mind is ravished in a lost cause. Through storytelling Nanapush pushes the resisting front forward into the symbolic field lest the Chippewa history should go down the drain along with their native heritage. His stories convey the cores of cultures left in the wake of the catastrophe. Telling stories is one of the few implements left for the underprivileged people to make survival possible. Storytelling is a way to compensate for the sense of desolation and helplessness resulting from cultural diaspora. Nanapush never gives up; when there is no other way to turn to, he talks. He talks Lulu back to life and talks himself to recover from the plague. Life continues, in a way, as long as the story does not stop.

Tracks foregrounds storytelling as a means of cultural empowerment. Stories connect events to articulate a pattern of what has happened, and storytelling gives a voice to the underrepresented in history. "Only looking back there is a pattern . . . There is a story to all, never visible while it is happening. Only after, when an old man sits, dreaming and talking in his chair,

the design springs clear," says Nanapush, and these words pretty much sum up Erdrich's task in this novel (34).

"Stories are potent rituals that reveal and re-create history," says Shaddock, "and the 'ceremony' of constant becoming" (118). The transformative value of storytelling is as important as its mimetic function. Stories provide an "imaginative signpost for the future," and the purpose of looking backward is to look forward (Shaddock 118). Shaddock stresses that it is important to reawaken the ability of storytelling in face of a contesting culture. The stories, created within and refined by the community, in turn participate in shaping the community. To resist "the seductive yet lethal lure of this witchery" brought by the whites' symbolic system, the Native Americans must resort to storytelling to counter the set of narratives that alienate them from their existential reality (Shaddock 114).

Tracks deals with the pressing problem of survival in both personal and tribal sense. Whether the power of the imaginary correlatives of the Indian world can still exert influence on contemporary American Indian life is of utmost relevance. Such mythic collective consciousness and unconscious as embraced in the novel is invoked to reestablish the connectedness between members of the community, between present and a shared past, between tribesmen and their diasporic material environments. With the Missipiju incarnated in Fleur, *Tracks* portrays the strength and fragility of an imaginary tradition in Indian culture. Within the supporting network, it makes things happen; however, it comes to liquidation when the community shatters. Erdrich recasts the traditional myths of Missipiju to make them serviceable for the twentieth-century Chippewa, who are more and more drawn into the dominant symbolic system. In this way *Tracks* is a Missipiju-like text, endowed with much transformational potential.

Erdrich remythologizes the Indian cultural tradition, which is mediated and empowered by imaginary communication with the real of nature. *Tracks* is a potent text mixed with the oral and written tradition, and its stories cross the thin line between tragedy and comedy. Nanapush, the recalcitrant old timer, is even more impressive as a hearty joker worthy of nomination for the role of Chippewa trickster hero. Even Pauline's masochistic perversion is not without humor. The novel features a motley array of characters whose stories tell the survival of early twentieth-century Chippewa Indians. Erdrich brings "the beauty, vitality, and healing potential of the old stories forward into the present" so that the unique Chippewa-Indian tradition may remain viable for generations to come (Clarke 43).



The novel also fulfills James Ruppert's notion that the best contemporary Native American literature bring "spirit into modern identity, community into society, and myth into modern imagination" (210). "Through their transpersonal connections to each other, to the landscape, and to myth, Erdrich's characters offer a compelling contemporary vision of the sources of identity," says Jeanne Smith ("Transpersonal" 14). Erdrich energizes the marginal stories of Native Americans' lives and creates a liminal agent in Fleur. In reviving Fleur's and others' stories of ambiguous powers and transformational identity, *Tracks* is "good to think."

VII

In Krupat's words, not only Native but also non-Native American critics have urged "a turn to 'Indian' modes of thinking about culture, history, and literature" to redress the imperialism of literary criticism. Such an urge, he says, "parallels most decidedly Western turn to "postmodernist" approaches to literature, history, and ethnography" (Krupat 6). Taking "Indian" as a figure of speech, Krupat expresses the tendency in postmodern critical philosophy to speak for the other and think like the other. Such postmodern decentralism is extensively explored in Deleuze and Gutarri's proposition of "becoming other" or "becoming minoritarian." "Indian modes of thinking" may be taken as a concretization of Deleuze and Guattari's reflections.

Proposed in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, "becoming minority," or to be more precise, "becoming minoritarian," lays emphasis on the non-essentializing act of becoming, and advocates an attitude to deviate from thinking and acting as the majority would do. Taking after a minority but in a deterritorialized sense, becoming minoritarian opposes the act of imperializing, territorializing, and homogenizing characteristic of the majority mode of expansionism.

"To become," Deleuze and Guattari expound, is to become anomalous, to transgress the institution, and to deliver oneself from the majority. Number is not the key point that makes a group or a party majority. The majority is the stronger one in power relations, who determines a state or standard and makes others minority whether in larger or smaller quantities. Therefore, all becoming that is liberating is becoming minoritarian. "Minoritarian" is not to be confused with a "minority;" the former lays emphasis on becoming or process while a "minority" refers to an aggregate or a state." Deleuze and Guattari make the distinction as follows:

Jews, Gypsies, etc., may constitute minorities under certain conditions, but that in itself does not make them becomings. One reterritorializes, or allows oneself to be reterritorialized, on a minority as a state; but in a becoming, one is deterritorialized. . . . Even blacks, as the Black Panthers said, must become-black. Even women must become-woman. (291)

It makes no sense in becoming man because "man is majoritarian par excellence," whereas becoming are minoritarian. "There is no becoming-man because man is the molar entity par excellence, whereas becomings are molecular" (292). "All becoming is a becoming-minoritarian" is the essence of Deleuze and Guattari's concept (291). "As Faulkner said, to avoid ending up a fascist there was no other choice but to become-black," Deleuze and Guattari alert us (292).



Becoming animal then suggests a way out of human's centering position in relation to nature, a way of looking at things from non-human's viewpoint. In Deleuze and Guattari's words, becoming animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating animal. . . . What is real is the becoming itself. . . . It concerns alliance. If evolution includes any veritable becomings, it is in the domain of symbioses that bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible filiations. . . . Becoming communicative or contagious. . . . Becoming is involutory, involution is creative. (238)

Following Deleuze and Guattari's lead and taking Native American literature into consideration, we may turn to consider becoming-native and finding the ways of feeling at home in a natural habitat. In this Native American's novel *Tracks* we are impressed by the ways in which natives negotiate with nature. We get acquainted with a mode of life in which the imaginary/imaginative mediates between the real and the symbolic and keeps them somewhat at balance. Becoming native implies getting away from the standard of measurement conditioned by the symbolic-capitalist system, and letting go of the imperialist impulse to colonize nature.

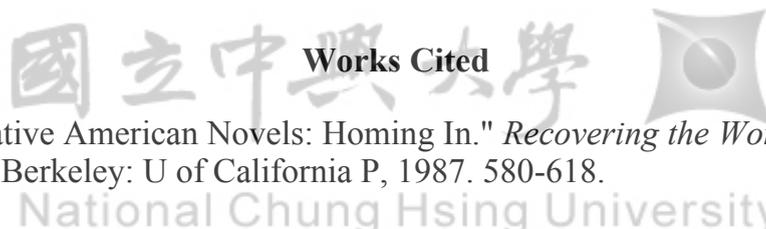
"Becoming" involves a willingness to imagine one as the other. The imaginary, made up from our imaginative participating in other modes of being, is productive rather than reductive. By imagination we "become" the other, and live differently. Such a way of approaching the other avoids taking the other as a piece of possession or knowledge. In Clifford Geertz's words:

To see ourselves as others see us can be eye-opening. To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves is the merest decency. But it is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves amongst others, as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds, that the largeness of mind, without which objectivity is self-congratulation and tolerance a sham, comes. (16)

"There exist not just numerous versions of reality but a multiplicity of realities," says Jeanne Roiser Smith ("Community" 93). The real and the imaginary are no less indispensable than the symbolic although they function in different logics. Taking the tripartite terms as tropes I offer in this paper another narrative of human's relationship with nature in order to carry on dialogues with many other speculations on this subject. Re-imagine nature, so that the real of nature may be conducted to make a meaningful part of our life, so that nature will continue to be born into our everyday life again and again through old and new narratives.

Notes

1. According to Peterson, academic accounts report that North Dakota was afflicted with outbreaks of smallpox from 1869 to 1870 and of tuberculosis from 1891 to 1901 (985).



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