Louise Erdrich in Company: The American Writer and Her Communities

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> Let me tell you about love, that silly word you believe is about whether you like somebody. . . . Love is divine only and difficult always. . . . It is a learned application without reason or motive except that it is God.
>
> (*Paradise* 141)

I.

By reading Louise Erdrich in the company of other prominent American writers and within the canon of American texts currently taught in colleges and universities, I want to demonstrate the value of a comparative critical approach in identifying and appreciating the fundamental Americanness of Erdrich's writing. Toni Morrison and, to a lesser degree, Flannery O'Connor will serve as comparison points to a close reading of Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001). Key aspects of Native American history—encounter, minority status, group identification—are simultaneously key aspects of what makes American literature most genuinely American. Especially when considered from outside of the United States, Louise Erdrich is as clearly an American author as she is a Native American author.

In a time when the word "love" has attained inflationary use to the point of meaninglessness, a reminder of love's qualifications as "divine," "difficult," and "learned" takes us back into the realm of gritty and unsentimental theology. The words quoted above originate neither with a character in an Erdrich novel nor are they taken from one of Flannery O'Connor's essays; instead, they are spoken by the Reverend Pulliam, a conservative minister, on the occasion of K. D.'s and Arnette's wedding in the "Divine" chapter of Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998). Both O'Connor and Morrison explore religious doctrine in their fiction, often in social settings that are minoritarian and perceive themselves under pressure from the larger world outside.

Morrison's tradition-bound leaders of an all-black town in Oklahoma or O'Connor's bewildered southerners looking for spiritual grounding find themselves in America but out of touch—at times intentionally so—with mainstream America. Calibrating the community's distance from mainstream America can be an important means of self-assurance and a point of pride. Flannery O'Connor insisted that the South's anguish was not caused by its alienation from the rest of the country, "but by the fact that it is not alienated enough . . . that we are being forced out, not only our many sins but of our few virtues" ("Fiction Writer" 802–3). Some of the town fathers of Ruby in Morrison's *Paradise* are willing to "shoot the white girl first" (3) in their effort to keep total control of the town and its environs. Yet no community can define itself without a foil to define against. Pulliam's hortatory sermon on love appeals not primarily to the ethnic, racial, or social status of his congregation, but to its religious convictions and ultimately to its standing in the world, its ethics, and its humanity.

The idea of a self-defining community in voluntary separation from the larger world is as old as the idea of America itself. Pilgrims and Puritans were animated by the dream of being a chosen people, a group set apart in holiness. While the concept of individualism is perhaps ultimately the most basic aspect of American self-understanding—and individualism will always tear apart the carefully designed group, whether in life or in fiction—group identification is not only key to American sensibilities but has, if anything, become more important in recent decades. Alexis de Tocqueville described the delicate balance between self-reliance and community identification in American society as early as 1831–32:

> The citizen of the United States is taught from infancy to rely upon his own exertions in order to resist the evils and the difficulties of life; he looks upon the social authority with an eye of mistrust and anxiety, and he claims its assistance only when he is unable to do without it. This habit may be traced even in the schools, where the children in their games are wont to

> submit to rules which they have themselves established, and to punish misdemeanors which they have themselves defined. The same spirit pervades every act of social life. . . . In the United States associations are established to promote the public safety, commerce, industry, morality, and religion. There is no end which the human will despairs of attaining through the combined power of individuals united into a society. (bk. 1, ch. 12, par. 2)

Ethnic and social identification has remained one of the primary determinants of Americans. Census forms offer a list of choices for Americans to identify themselves according to racial and ethnic heritage, and much literary scholarship of recent decades is unthinkable without the categories of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. In large part, the significance of these identifications is historically determined. African Americans and Native Americans were designated as "other" by those in power and were thus forcibly disadvantaged throughout the history of their encounter with European Americans. Yet in acknowledging and rectifying race-based and historical injustices, we should not fall into the essentialist trap of allowing race or any other social category to remain a permanent separator. In paying careful attention to narrations from and by minorities, in appreciating the degree of authenticity of such narratives, we tend to overlook not just the other side of the equation, the individual who is so important to American self-understanding. We have also too often overlooked the authentic Americanness of such texts. By "Americanness" I certainly do not mean the jingoistic abuses of that term, perennially popular with political and religious fanatics. I refer instead to the long American tradition—from Thomas Jefferson to Susan Sontag—of writing about this country, about its people and its history, with an observant eye and a true pen. I am invoking a national literature that knows its practitioners united as Americans in addition to whatever else they may be and whatever other allegiances, hereditary or voluntary, they may embrace. In this American literature, Phillis Wheatley, William Apess, and Ralph Waldo Emerson are equally American.

Such an understanding of Americanness thus also puts Erdrich, Morrison, and O'Connor at the center of an American canon of literature in an attempt to appreciate their complex and fluid integration of minority and mainstream cultural facets. My own viewpoint as an Americanist from Europe is as limited as anybody else's, but the limitations are different: I try to perceive American literature as a national literature from the vantage point of geographical distance, after having studied and taught in the United States for over twenty years. Approaching Native American studies requires particular caveats, of course. From a distance, Europeans find it easy to agree to Native claims for originary possession of the American soil because little is at stake for them. Americans with European ancestors are in a more difficult position relative to this question, and few would embrace Isaac McCaslin's visionary reparation policies of relinquishing land described in Faulkner's *The Bear*.

II.

Few critics have articulated the persistent dilemma between the presumed essential identity and the postmodern socially constructed position of individuals or groups better than Satya P. Mohanty. Mohanty, in a 1993 article in *Cultural Critique*, pointed to the obvious limitations of "disputes over genuineness or authenticity" in discussing minority literatures from an essentialist point of view and the equally limited perspectives offered by a postmodernism that assumes identities to be completely constructed and thus distrusts experience (41–42). Present-day examples can easily be adduced for illustration: In the realm of religion, for example, no reasonable person would claim that President Jimmy Carter's Baptist faith and the cynical Westboro Baptist Church have anything essentially Baptist in common. The notion of an essential Baptist identity is thereby rendered absurd, though individual Baptists can, of course, situate themselves genuinely—experientially—in such an identity. On the other side of the issue, the social construction of manhood and womanhood in the United States, while constantly

undergoing change in the legal arena, the world of fiction and imagination, and the practical living conditions of women and men in the workplace, is not sufficient to describe the gendered experience we live, which is in large part determined by biology. Social descriptions of sex—though not perhaps gender—will forever be insufficient to bring theory and practice into perfect alignment; experience trumps essentialism in this case. The dilemma between essence and experience continues.[1]

Fully aware of the impossibility of defining "American" satisfactorily as either social construct or experience, I want to make a claim for Louise Erdrich's work as genuinely American literature, using comparative methods to achieve my goal. My method therefore will consist in circumscribing (but not thereby defining) "American" with the help of three literary-historical parameters that bear a certain self-evidentiary weight and, in a complementary move, looking at a specific Erdrich text side-by-side with other texts by writers who are now "experientially" perceived by readers as having gone far beyond the parochial social identifiers that may have initially identified them. The edifice of comparison I am thus constructing is rather delicate and transitory, like Robert Frost's "silken tent," which "is loosely bound / By countless silken ties of love and thought" (9–10). Our contemporary understanding of Flannery O'Connor has left behind the critical corner she constructed in part for herself when she meditated on the fate of "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South." Toni Morrison, in turn, has shed the limitations of the label "African American writer" precisely by enlarging what that term can encompass and by becoming an American writer who is African American. Likewise, I suggest that Louise Erdrich has contributed to making Native American lives part and parcel of American life without denying their particularity. I hope to demonstrate the merit of a comparative approach and the continuing need to re-perform such analyses for new historical moments.

III.

Louise Erdrich has been a part of the American literary landscape long enough to carve out a secure place for herself in its topography, but a clear definition of that place is still missing. We no longer need to borrow explanatory patterns from other writers, as we did in the 1980s (then, her interconnected novels and families irresistibly suggested Faulkner); by now, Erdrich has become a writer against whom others are measured. If we want to establish the particularities of Erdrich's accomplishments, however, we still need to compare her to other writers who have succeeded similarly. The apparent paradox of a claim for uniqueness and the need for comparison is difficult to resolve but lies at the heart of all literary comparisons: We compare the similarities so that we may contrast the differences. The art of literary comparison lies in the construction of patterns that heuristically, for a certain time, allow us to see things afresh so as to advance our understanding. Looking for models suggests a derivative approach; looking for peers shows us traces of historical movement.

What does it mean to situate Erdrich as an American writer while looking from a European vantage point? Erdrich has always been an American writer, of course, but she has been claimed at times as "Native American" or "woman writer" or "trickster and magical realism" writer or "German American" writer or "Catholic novelist"[2] so strongly that her compound Americanness has been obscured. These qualifying adjectives again illustrate the paradox: Erdrich can be discovered in her similarities to other Native American, women, German American, or Catholic writers, but only at the expense of shortchanging other significant parts of her complexity. At the same time, even the adjective "American" can only mean something if it is further defined and thereby (de)limited.

Setting aside for the moment the difficulty of employing "American" not as a hemispheric designation but, in its more common, limited

usage, as adjective for the United States, I want to focus on those aspects of American literature that most clearly distinguish it from European national literatures. By calling her an American writer, then, I mean to evoke for Erdrich a place within a national literature that can be seen as defined in fundamental ways by three historical and social conditions. In their totality, these three circumscribe the difference of American national literature from European national literatures. All three are both essential and abiding in their significance and yet subject to constant modification by experience: the encounter of Europeans and Native Americans, the negotiation of majority and minority groups relative to each other, and the building of communities as nodes of identification for Americans. If we denied the initiatory and lasting significance of Columbus's arrival in the New World and the conflictual narratives spawned by that encounter, we would falsify the historical record. Native American literature of the past two generations, from N. Scott Momaday through Gerald Vizenor to Sherman Alexie, has situated itself in important ways in that same conflict by evoking the contrasts between life on and off the reservation and by rethinking the place of Native culture and Native peoples within mainstream America.[3] Similarly, a full awareness of the complex history of slavery, the Civil War, the civil rights movement, and the ongoing social negotiations of any and all minority groups in the United States—whether African Americans, various ethnic and national strands of Europeans, Jews, Muslims, or more recently, Hispanic immigrants—is fundamental to a correct historical understanding of the American experience. American social policy as expressed, for example, in the national census, is linked to ethnic or racial affiliation in ways that are unthinkable in Europe. Ethnic belonging is an important part of Americans' sense of self and origin. Finally, American fiction and historical narrative is often significantly a record of the building of communities. From William Bradford's Plimouth Plantation and Nathaniel Hawthorne's Brook Farm to Edith Wharton's New York Dutch aristocrats, Willa Cather's Prairie Bohemians, John Steinbeck's Okies, and Joy Nicholson's *Tribes*

of Palos Verdes, the fates of fairly small communities have been a central concern of American writers. Minority writers have explored the question of community with particular panache: George Washington Cable's two sets of *Grandissimes* inhabit the complex racialized world of New Orleans; Nella Larsen's characters wonder about "passing" from one community to another; and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, a community of one, defines himself first against the prevailing communities already in existence and later joins or founds alternate communities. Significantly, these American communities are often religious in origin, again harking back to Plimouth Plantation or New Harmony, or—to suggest a contemporary instance—issuing from sectarian colleges and universities. An attention to the construction of fictional communities, together with due reference to Native/European encounters as well as minority discourses, may allow us to better define Louise Erdrich's particular status as an American writer.

In balancing identitarian qualities such as ethnicity, religion, or gender against the putative Americanness of a writer, I do not want to set up an oppositional binary. Instead, I want to suggest that identitarian qualities contribute to, but do not exhaust, a writer's character. My own critical position is thus between two possible extremes. On one hand, we have Leslie Marmon Silko, who argued in 1986 that Erdrich's *Beet Queen* was so postmodern as to have betrayed genuine (essentialist?) Native American storytelling. On the other hand, we have David Treuer, who has argued that Erdrich should be measured as a "writer" and not as a "Native American writer."[4] To me, then, Erdrich's biological and biographical qualities—woman writer, enrolled member of a Native community, part-German ancestry, Catholic upbringing—are necessary but insufficient characteristics because they are partial. Together, and only together, they feed her identity as American writer, and together they compose it in its uniqueness. Personality and identity are not a question of either/or binaries but of the proportionate accretion of multiple traits.

IV.

The forward movement of time itself is in part responsible for the changing canonical status of certain texts within American literature. When a revolution is victorious, its ideas become the norm, suddenly themselves subject to new revolutionary challenge. Upstarts become classics, marginal texts move to the center, the sting of protest lessens, and the raison d'être needs to be defined afresh. Willa Cather's Nebraska novels brought Henry James's "international theme" to a portion of America that would quickly turn from frontier to heartland. Once her Bohemians became Americans, Cather seemed less fresh, until a new generation of readers unearthed, almost simultaneously, her environmental and lesbian subtexts and reinscribed Cather into two different literary traditions and interpretive patterns. Flannery O'Connor could safely be categorized as a Catholic novelist in the 1950s, when J. F. Powers and Graham Greene supplied the models for such a designation. O'Connor seemed to have less relevance when southern women writers became a favorite object of study in the late 1970s and 1980s because her difference in ideology, biography, and subject matter from Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, and Katherine Anne Porter was all too obvious. Scholars now read O'Connor attentively, and her focus on violence is even discussed in connection with the national discourse on terror (Hewitt and Donahoo). In 1999, Michael Nowlin called attention to the manner in which Toni Morrison had supplemented her successful fiction about African American experiences with theoretical texts, in particular, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993). Nowlin surmised that by "transfigur[ing] her usual subject matter, the complex world of black Americans, into a synecdoche for America," Morrison had acknowledged the particular responsibility she had taken on "as though the price for moving irreversibly from margin to center and inserting herself into an American canon dominated by white male writers was to make African American identity a national rather than tribal question" (151–52). Is the project of becoming American, then, as Nowlin claims in his reading of Morrison, "a notion

of cultural pluralism grounded in racial difference" (152)? Is it true, as he further claims, that "one cannot write *American* literature … without reinscribing the racial divide that makes blackness that literature's fundamental trope" (153)? Here, we have Louise Erdrich's predicament in a nutshell. Her humanity transcends her ethnic or tribal affiliation. Her characters are equally interesting, whether they are Native or European Americans. And they become more fully American as their fates reveal themselves to us ever closer to our historical present. Nanapush or Four Souls are now remote from mainstream American experience. Power broker Lyman Lamartine, jail breaker Gerry Nanapush, or multiwived entrepreneur Jack Mauser could be people from any American neighborhood. Lipsha Morrissey, finally, may be destined to become a character of world literature as much as Huckleberry Finn.

V.

Louise Erdrich's 2001 novel, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, serves as a key example of my aforementioned theoretical contentions. Let us take a final look at my objects of comparison before delving into Erdrich's fictional reservation. Toni Morrison's *Paradise* describes the history of an all-black town in Oklahoma whose founding fathers, in two "installments" of settlements, Haven and Ruby, seek to find social peace in voluntary segregation and an oligarchical leadership obedient to the town's patriarchal founding traditions. Their nemesis is a nearby community of women, which mutates from an Indian school to a convent to a women's shelter. All of these latter manifestations are examples of identitarian groups that are even smaller than the black township. The escalating conflict results in a violent encounter that erupts in July 1976, around the bicentennial of the United States. Flannery O'Connor's collection of stories, *Everything that Rises Must Converge* (1965), offers vignettes of southern life, whose characters haphazardly stumble from daily inconveniences into existential questions. The subtle separations between town and country folk, believers and unbelievers, naïfs and con men, establish patterns of group membership.

O'Connor's orthodox and hard-nosed Catholicism provides the ferment within which these crises are negotiated. Louise Erdrich's *Last Report* describes individuals and communities looking for spiritual sustenance by unconventional means. By looking at the fates of these communities and the manner in which the writers suggest the significance of spiritual questions to their readers, we may see Erdrich in a context defined by Morrison and O'Connor, who both stand for something specific and yet transcend it: Morrison writes out of her African American experience but, by virtue of her Nobel Prize, she is recognized as an American (not only as African American) writer within world literature.[5] O'Connor, quirky and grotesque though she and her characters may appear, is recognized as a serious southern American writer in the Catholic tradition. Ethnicity, regional affiliation, religion, and gender thus are contributing factors to these writers' standing, but they are absorbed in the Americanness of each. Erdrich's *Last Report* is constituted in important ways through the considerations of ethnicity, region, religion, and gender, but in employing those categories with considerable (and sometimes refreshingly irreverent) playfulness, Erdrich transcends the individual categories toward an American entirety.

Without wishing to diminish the Native authenticity of Erdrich's work in any way, I want to suggest the value of reading her 2001 novel within the canonical tradition of American literature. Set on a fictional reservation and offering deeply observed descriptions of Native life along with unflinching evocations of abject poverty, *Last Report* is steeped in Catholic lore while cognizant of the charged interaction of Native and missionary cultures, abounds in rich, evocative descriptions of northern landscape, and describes religious, musical, and sexual ecstasy. It is, above all, an American novel. In the figure of Agnes/Father Damien, Erdrich has created an Adamic American hero. Self-begotten in the decisive act of slipping on the clothes of a dead priest while standing by the side of a roaring river, Agnes reinvents herself as Father Damien much as Jay Gatsby "sprang from his Platonic conception of himself" (Fitzgerald 104). As Huck Finn, quintessential American

youngster, dons girl's clothes prior to his advance into the Deep South from which he will depart for the western territories (Twain 697), so young Agnes turns herself male for protection and social status while penetrating into the northern wilderness. "Call me Damien Modeste," she might have said at the beginning of her new life, as she begins a test of survival in both physical and metaphysical terms—the constant danger of starvation and the development of a Catholic theology and practice responsive to local conditions—that is no less existential than that of Ishmael in Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Like Ishmael, Father Damien will be the story's only survivor, the only one who can still offer testimony to Father Jude, the inquisitive visitor sent by the Vatican. Like Salinger's Holden Caulfield, Father Damien will find his life's consuming duty to be that of caretaking, the cure of his Native flock. I recognize that Gatsby, Huck, Ishmael, and Holden are the creations of white male novelists and that I may bend—though not intentionally misread—Erdrich's text in order to suggest a literary parentage; however, Thea Kronborg's musicianship, Alexandra Bergson's masculine clothing and vacillating gender position, and Antonia Shimerda's caring and competent motherhood and leadership of a farm would also allow us to find in Willa Cather's novels an equally rich set of precursors for Erdrich. In any case, our ability to place motifs from Erdrich's *Last Report* into different strands of American literature confirms the assertion that this text is as much to be appreciated for its American appeal as for its Native roots—and that the duality of this appreciation is complementary, not conflictual.

Last Report enacts the three parameters of encounter, minority consciousness, and group identification suggested above. Father Damien's life is patterned as an American story along the lines of motifs familiar from the American literary tradition, especially those portions of it which were sometimes interpreted as replicating biblical history and thus marking Americans as a chosen people. "All that happened began with that flow of water" (11): Farmer Berndt Vogel[6] loses part of his topsoil but gains a waif seeking food and shelter and, later, his bed. A

brief period of happiness comes to an end when a bank robber known as the Actor, disguised as a priest, wounds Agnes and eventually dies, along with Berndt who has pursued them. A season or two later, another flood of biblical proportions sweeps Agnes, dressed only in "the white treble clef of her flannel nightdress" (39) out of civilization, clinging to a piano that might be Queequeg's coffin or Huck's raft. Agnes dons the garb of a drowned priest and becomes Father Damien as she lights out for the Indian territories of the Far North. Erdrich clearly intends us to read Agnes as comprehending her fate in tropological terms—that is, as the unfolding of certain patterns designed by a higher power, perhaps God, and decipherable in certain key events in her life, much as Puritan divines did:

> Now and then Agnes recalled a tiny portion of her encounter with the Actor, and she came to understand it as a sure prefigurement and sign of what was to come. The Actor had influenced the quality of Father Damien's disguise, for when Agnes was held by that rope-tough arm against the car door she'd felt remote enough, from blood loss, to marvel at and assess the Actor's change in personality from priest to robber. (76)[7]

Agnes's acculturation to the reservation at Little No Horse replicates metonymically the outlines of Native American history after the encounter with Europeans. Famine, land loss, decimation by influenza, internal fighting over the correct response to government and land agents' demands, the arrival of a priest who is in turn feared, ridiculed, and welcomed but who sufficiently dedicated to try and preserve his flock's language and grammar, and even unsuccessful attempts to right the wrongs of governmental rapaciousness—all these are examples of stories repeated countless times over the course of the past centuries as European Americans inexorably moved westward. Father Damien confesses to his inquisitor that he has long abandoned his belief in the redemptive quality of conversion: He stayed on the reservation "out of duty to the practical desperation of the situation" (239).

Erdrich wears her deep knowledge of Catholicism lightly but slyly in this novel. Her early book of poetry, *Baptism of Desire* (1989), manifested her profound knowledge of some fairly obscure points of Catholic doctrine, among them the eponymous baptism of desire, which one can obtain with full sacramental validity even if no rite of baptism has been performed. At the same time, the very notion of "desire" has obvious connotations of erotic desire, particularly coming from an author who writes as lyrically about sex as Erdrich does. In a similar mingling of orthodoxy and subversion, Agnes arrives on the reservation on the feast of Saint Dismas, "the first day of her existence as Father Damien, the first day of the great lie that was her life" (*Last Report* 61). Saint Dismas, the "good thief" crucified next to Jesus and promised entry into paradise by the dying Savior, was never canonized by the Catholic Church but is venerated in some localities ("Dismas"). His feast day is March 25, which is, ironically, also the feast day of the Annunciation—that is, the day on which Mary is told by the angel that she will be the mother of Christ, the beginning of the great mystery of the incarnation. We see Father Damien in this novel performing the work of God as obediently as Mary, who called herself "the Lord's handmaiden." Occasionally we see Damien celebrating Mass, the central sacrament of his faith, but more often we see him hearing confession, through which he is made privy to knowledge about rapes, trauma, stillborn children, gruesome murders, assaults, pretended piety, and many more frailties of the human body and spirit. The secrecy and mystery surrounding the sacrament of confession is at the tropological foundation of this novel of disguise and dissimulation, in which almost nobody is what he or she seems to be. Nonetheless, in true American fashion, everyone is allowed to be what he or she wants to be.

While Dismas is not a saint, Damien certainly is. He is a Belgian priest (1840–89), who—beatified in 1995 and canonized in 2009, after the appearance of the novel—served in a lepers' colony in Hawaii and eventually died of leprosy himself. Known also as apostle to the outcast, he prefigures the fate that Erdrich constructs for Father Damien,

who ministers to Native Americans sequestered on a reservation ("De Veuster"). To round out the roster of significant names, the Catholic calendar recognizes several saints called Agnes, but Agnes of Rome is most likely the model upon which Erdrich builds her central protagonist. This particular saint is iconographically represented with a lamb ("Agnes"). As Father Damien denies his body and sacrifices himself for his flock, though not unto death, the suggestion of an *agnus Dei*, "lamb of God," is implied in Erdrich's choice of this name.

Erdrich describes the reservation perfectly in terms of a human community that seeks to give itself shape: "It was a place of shifting allegiances, new feuds and old animosities, a place of clan teasing, jealousy, comfort, and love" (75). Agnes is defined by her community so much that the orthodoxy of her belief is challenged. She discovers that Ojibwe worship practices are "compatible with the teachings of Christ" (49) and begins "to address the trinity as four and to include the spirit of each direction" (182). She quickly sets aside gender restrictions, celibacy taboos, and conventional expectations, finding her ministry deepened by her brief but intense sexual experience with an apprentice priest and the peculiar combination of active and contemplative life that this community demands. In a somewhat alienated form, Agnes's story is an inverted captivity narrative. She makes herself captive of two conditions—male disguise and priestly accoutrements—which define her and also allow her certain safe modes of living.

The conclusion of the consensual, fulfilling sexual relationship with the apprentice priest pushes Agnes to answer two questions about her core identity in response to Father Gregory's challenges. Agnes has nothing to say when Gregory asserts, "You are a *woman*" (206), as if brushing away the biological fact that has enabled the two of them to have their relationship. She nevertheless answers with conviction, "I am a priest" (206), confirming thereby that her chosen identity—the position within the group to which she ministers she has taken *by choice*—is now the irrevocable portion of her identity. In true Ameri-

can fashion, she herself has been changed by the community to discover her genuine vocation.

As Agnes's passion for her calling finds material expression in a new church, so her spirituality, like that of Reverend Pulliam, is centered in a sermon she gives to the snakes that live in the church. It is a sermon on the great Christian—and human—topic of love. The transformation of the protagonist's identity is completed in the metamorphosis from Agnes's soft sensuality of sexual love into Damien's preaching of the indefinable love that responds to God's call: "What is the whole of our existence . . . but the sound of an appalling love?" (226). Like Pulliam, though not in the service of social conservatism but in the service of his Native congregation, he continues, "Or is God's love, perhaps, something very different from what we think we know?" (227). Whereas Pulliam offers declarative definitions of love with certainty, Damien articulates the questions at his core in the form of submission to his calling, another form of love: "If I am loved . . . it is a merciless and exacting love against which I have no defense. If I am not loved, then I am being pitilessly manipulated by a force I cannot withstand, either, and so it is all the same. I must do what I must do. Go in peace" (227). Submission to service within a community has given Agnes/Damien the reason for continuing to live. S/he builds a life out of experience and essence together. The cultural syncretism of Native and Catholic lives is enlarged by the manner in which the plot of the novel is inscribed into the American literary tradition. The success of that cultural and literary negotiation seems to me to be the real miracle at Little No Horse.

Notes

1. Mohanty's interpretation of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* turns into an interesting deconstruction of the epistemic assumptions held by "experientialists" and "postmodernists" (my terms) alike and makes for fascinating reading. Mohanty's 1993 article appeared before the "memory boom" of the 1990s, continuing to this day, flooded the book market with experiential narratives that seemed to shift the tide momentarily away from the hegemony of postmodern analytical thought that had held sway throughout the 1980s.

2. See, for example, Couser, Austenfeld, and Quinlan.
3. See, for example, Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), Vizenor's *The Trickster of Liberty* (1988), or Alexie's *Reservation Blues* (1995).
4. Says Treuer, critically: "Because Erdrich happens to be Ojibwe, her novels are interpreted as expressions of Ojibwe world-view, not as literary creations" (qtd. in Kennedy 49). A moment later, the interviewer, Virginia Kennedy, suggests a position that Treuer does not fully accept: "Your perspective is that Native writers like Silko and Erdrich write, communicating bits and pieces of their respective cultures to define their cultural experience for people who have no other way of 'knowing' it; they are coming to 'us,' rather than making us work harder to come to them, so to speak" (52). Treuer also elegantly dismisses critical concern with ethnicity even more radically than I suggested in cautioning against false essentialism: "DNA is absolutely the most important thing to most critics, and that is what is killing our genre" (qtd. in Kennedy 49). In his *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual*, Treuer actually makes very interesting arguments that place Erdrich in company with Flaubert and notes that "Erdrich's ability to find that one thing that can stand in for all the rest is almost unequalled and only surpassed by Toni Morrison's symbolic strokes" (35, 38–39).
5. According to the Nobel Prize Committee, Morrison was awarded the 1993 Nobel Prize as one "who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality." I read "essential" in this context as meaning "basic," "central," or "undeniable." The committee was probably not taking a stance on the question of philosophical essentialism.
6. Vogel's name and origin suggest relationships of this figure with another Swabian, Fidelis Waldvogel, protagonist of *The Master Butchers Singing Club* (2003).
7. The town fathers of Ruby have an identical sense of tropological fulfillment in guiding the fate of their town.

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