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'You cannot assimilate Indian ghosts': A Magical Realist Reading of Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman*

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Abstract
In *The Night Watchman* (2020), Louise Erdrich continues to blur the lines between history and fiction as she has done in several of her novels. Erdrich introduces the reader to several magical elements that appear to be entirely real: two ghosts, a dog that talks, and an unearthly powwow with Jesus as one of the dancers. The main objective of this article is to show how Erdrich's adoption of a magical realist narrative mode grants her the authority to challenge "the orthodox version of history" (Holgate 2015: 635) and to "re-envision" Native American history from the perspective of "the dispossessed, the silenced, and the marginalized" (Slemon 1995: 422). In particular, this article investigates the characterization and function of one of the two ghosts that appear in the novel in the context of two significant eras in the history of Native Americans: off-reservation boarding schools and the termination policy of the 1950s.

Key words
Native Americans; Louise Erdrich; The Night Watchman; *Off-reservation boarding schools; Ancestor ghosts; Magical Realism*

Introduction

Set in North Dakota in the 1950s, *The Night Watchman* (2020) tells the story of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians and their struggle against the government's attempt to terminate federal support to reservations. At the center of that struggle is the band's leader Thomas Wazhashk, a fictional character based on Louise Erdrich's own grandfather Patrick Gourneau who actually led the fight against termination while working as a night watchman at the Turtle Mountain Jewel Bearing Plant. Erdrich depicts the termination crisis quite explicitly that the novel stands as a documentary history of that era, which is validated by the fact that a major source for Erdrich's knowledge of that period was her grandfather's personal letters[1]. On a parallel line to Wazhashk's struggle, there is the subplot of Pixie who struggles on her own to provide for her small family and to find her

sister who goes to the city and disappears. The common theme that connects the two intertwined storylines is survival; not that of Patrice and Wazhashk as individuals, but the survival of Native Americans as a people.

The Night Watchman features two ghosts that interact openly with the other characters, a dog that talks and informs Patrice of her sister's whereabouts, and an unearthly powwow with Jesus as one of the dancers. This article attempts to show how, by adopting a magical realist narrative framework, Erdrich re-envisions Native American history by narrating her story from the perspective of "the dispossessed, the silenced, and the marginalized" (Slemon 1995: 422). By supplementing a historical narrative with several magical elements that seem to be entirely real, Erdrich continues to "[disrupt] the boundaries between history and fiction" (Stripes 1991: 26) as she has done in *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), and *Tracks* (1988). This article particularly investigates the characterization and function of Roderick, one of the two ghosts that appear in the novel[2], in the context of two significant eras in the history of Native Americans: off-reservation boarding schools and the termination policy.

An enrolled member of the Chippewa Indians of North Dakota (Beidler and Barton 1999: 1), Erdrich has already addressed in her earlier novels major issues in the history of Native Americans, such as government boarding schools and the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887[3]. In the name of assimilation, these policies devastated Native Americans by taking their land, obliterating their traditions, and eventually driving them into poverty and disintegration. Likewise, the termination policy of the 1950s was a further step towards the assimilation of Native Americans and the end of tribal life and sovereignty. In *The Night Watchman* Erdrich demonstrates how after surviving "smallpox, the Winchester repeating rifle, the Hotchkiss gun, and tuberculosis . . . the flu epidemic of 1918, and [having] fought in four or five deadly United States wars" (Ch.17), Native Americans were still being treated by the government as a 'problem' that requires a solution.

Magical realist elements in *The Night Watchman*

Writing about Indigenous cultures, Daniel Heath Justice emphasizes that "the boundaries between [...] reality and the Spirit Worlds are thin and permeable, and they bleed into one another" (2018: 124). This explains why "the hauntings of the dispossessed, restless ancestors" (2018: 126) are ordinary occurrences in Native American literature. In *The Night Watchman* Erdrich presents to the reader a peculiar Native American world-view "where the mythical and the rational coexist" (Aldea 2011: 3) naturally, as if "magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed" (Faris 1995: 163). By so doing, Erdrich manages to recall the shared traumatic histories of Native Americans. She shows how "the colonial fragmentation and disfiguring sufferings of the past continue in the present" (Justice 2018: 82), which denotes "a continuity in Indigenous experience across time and space" (Justice 2018: 131). Even though magical realism is essentially a Western theory that attributes unfavorable aspects such as magic and irrationality to non-European peoples, Maggie Ann Bowers contends that several multi-ethnic

American writers repurpose magical realism by using it "to express their own personal interpretations of their cross-cultural contexts in the face of domination by European American culture" (2004: 80). Bowers further demonstrates that "the dangers of [promoting] colonial racial assumptions have been lessened by the predominance of writing from the cross-cultural perspective of a narrator who possesses a predominantly non-European or non-Western cultural perspective" (2004: 80). In a sense, these writers manipulate the Western literary tradition of magical realism by allowing the marginalized, the silenced, and the colonized to speak through it.

The Night Watchman features several magical realist elements, the first of which is the presence of ghosts, which is instrumental in the investigation of the past (Brogan 1996: 196). As for the setting of the novel, Bowers explains that magical realism has been generally associated with rural settings, yet in some cases writers choose to set their stories in "large cities that are the focus of political and social tensions" (2004: 31). Erdrich's novel combines the benefits of both rural and urban settings; it is set mostly in the destitute small township of Turtle Mountain without any contact with those in power, while certain critical moments in the future of the tribe are set in Minneapolis and Washington DC. The presence of multiple narrators with "multiple storylines [...] [interweaving] in time through the past and present in a non-linear fashion," is also "Typical of much magical realist fiction that is influenced by an oral storytelling tradition" (Holgate 2015: 636).

Postcolonial critics Homi Bhabha, Bill Ashcroft, and Helen Tiffin, among others, argue that magical realism is so closely associated with postcolonial literature that some would say that "magical realism *was* postcolonial fiction" (qtd. in Sasser 2014: 8, emphasis original). In the same context, Elleke Boehmer explains that magical realism enables postcolonial writers "to express their view of a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural clash and displacement" (2005: 229). These writers "[challenge] the assumptions of an authoritative colonialist attitude [and] disrupt official and defined authoritative assumptions about reality, truth and history" (Bowers 2004: 90) by relying on Indigenous resources of knowledge. In *The Night Watchman* Erdrich juxtaposes Indigenous and Western sources of knowledge to confirm the authenticity and credibility of her particular version of Native American history. Once the lines between the real and the magical are dissolved, multiple versions of truth are revealed (Bowers 2004: 85). Evidently, Erdrich is intent on undermining Western sources of knowledge in favor of a traditional and more authentic Indigenous alternative.

Roderick's 'other-than-human' personhood

Building on the recent scholarship on agency and personhood which perceives animals, plants, objects, and spirits as "other-than-human" persons that are capable of influencing change (Harrison-Buck and Hendon 2018: 5), Daniel Heath Justice contends that "Indigenous bodies, whether living or dead, are ongoing sites of struggle" (2018: 132). Justice further argues that the persistent relationship between Indigenous people and the 'other-than-human' persons is essential in

their struggle against colonialism (2018: 78). In the context of Native American culture where "personhood is decidedly *not* limited to the living, or to the human" (Justice 2018: 82, emphasis original), ancestral ghosts or talking animals are not to be considered as "fictive, fantastical, or illusory" (Justice 2018: 86); they are active social beings whose function is to establish meaningful connections between ancestors and their descendants. In *The Night Watchman*, Roderick is not depicted as a conventional ghost whose job is to haunt people through random apparitions. Roderick is given an ordinary name like the rest of the characters with no outright reference to his true identity as a ghost, which causes "some unsettling doubts in the reader's effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events" (Warnes 2009: 5). More importantly, Erdrich gives Roderick corporeal qualities that provide him with "the capacity to act" (Harrison-Buck and Hendon 2018: 5). For example, Roderick keeps an eye on Wazhashk and LaBatte and warns them when they are in danger. He also rides public transportation, joins the tribal delegation to Congress, and his name even appears in Erdrich's semi-official version of the hearings as will be illustrated later.

Richard Perez and Victoria A. Chevalier argue that ghosts in twenty-first century literature "not only [stand] in for the trauma of the past, but as the expansion of Being, beckoning us toward the potential of a more just and imaginative future" (2020: 7). Furthermore, in her influential essay on the nature of ghosts in Latin American fiction, Lois Parkinson Zamora argues that literary ghosts could function "as reminders of communal crimes, crises, cruelties. They may suggest displacement and alienation or, alternatively, reunion and communion" (1995: 497). The function of ghosts as "bearers of cultural and historical burdens" (Zamora 1995: 497) applies to Roderick, particularly when examined in the context of historical traumas. Even though more than seventy years separate the establishment of the first off-reservation boarding school at Carlisle (1879) and the beginning of the termination policy (1953), Erdrich conjures Roderick to allow him to witness and participate in yet another historical crisis. This underlines Kathleen Brogan's argument that ghosts "can also represent continuity with the past" (1996: 170). Indeed, the conjuring of Roderick allows Erdrich to expand her narrative to span such a long period in the history of Native Americans so that she can prove how the US long-term assimilation policy has been trying by all means to "change Indians into whites" (Ch.16).

According to Perez and Chevalier, writers who conjure ghosts of victims of traumatic experiences allow their testimonies [...] [to] be disclosed" (2020: 15), which might provide a chance for healing. Brogan explains that in the context of traditional Chippewa religion, ancestral ghosts have "powerful and positive connotations" as they are believed to play a significant role in the "retrieval of lost traditions [and] the construction of ethnic identity and group history" (1996: 170). Besides using ghosts as metaphors for "cultural invisibility and cultural continuity" (Brogan 1996: 170), Erdrich uses them as a source for empowerment and revitalization. This is achieved by depicting Roderick, not as a victim of colonialism but as a spiritual force that positively influences the lives of others. In one of his encounters with Thomas Wazhashk, Roderick declares that he has come back to save their other friend, LaBatte, who steals from his workplace. When

Wazhashk confronts LaBatte and knows that Roderick is telling the truth, he wonders "How could it be that someone who was a fiction of his own brain told him something that was true?" (Ch.30). By placing Roderick in a realist context, Erdrich authenticates Native American ways of knowing and traditional belief systems to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers.

What is strikingly evident in *The Night Watchman* is "The copresence of oddities, the interaction of the bizarre with the entirely ordinary" (Wilson 1995: 210). When the Turtle Mountain delegation heads back home after the hearing, Erdrich mentions that Roderick "again missed the train. But there were so many Indian ghosts in Washington that he decided to stay" (Ch.95). The reader expects that a ghost would be able to fly home or cross through a virtual wall back to the reservation, but Erdrich continues to smoothly move back and forth between two different realms: the real and the magical. To uncover "the buried traces of indigenous cultural identity" (Zamora 1995: 500), Erdrich enters into the world of the many Native American ghosts that Roderick finds in Washington DC. When he roams this city that is packed with "lively ghosts," Roderick is surprised with the many

> drawers and cabinets of his own kind of people! Indian ghosts stuck to their bones or scalp locks or pieces of skin. Some of the holy pipes were singing monotonously. Other ghosts were uproariously gambling with their own bones. There were ghostly ghost-dance shirts, buzzing war shields, gurgling baby makizinan [...]. For centuries, Indians had gone to Washington for the same reasons as the little party from the Turtle Mountains. (Ch.95)

Erdrich here creates a parallel world where Native American ancestors uphold to their old tribal ways; a world where their communal identity persists. By designating them as bearers of cultural memory, Erdrich counters the degrading treatment of Indigenous ancestors and cultural artifacts as mere bizarre objects displayed in a museum (Justice 2018: 139). By doing so, Erdrich manages to "[connect] an awareness of the ghostly presence of the dead with the discovery of identity and the creation of history" (Brogan 1996: 169). On one hand, then, Erdrich uses Roderick to navigate the past in an attempt to uncover the repressed memories of the atrocities of settler colonialism. On the other hand, by calling upon the spirits of the ancestors and assigning them a role to play in the future of their descendants, Erdrich validates Justice's argument that there is "a continuity in Indigenous experience across time and space" and that "death itself is no sanctuary from colonialism" (2018: 131).

Roderick and Boarding School Trauma

In his highly acclaimed study *Education for Extinction*: *American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928*, David Wallace Adams equates the government boarding school policy to the many threats that Native Americans had to face, such as "smallpox, missionaries, Conestoga wagons, barbed wire, and smoking locomotives" (1995: 5). The main goal for establishing off-reservation boarding

schools was to individualize Native American children by 'quarantining' them from their families (Coleman 1993: 43), which proved to be the most effective of all assimilative policies.[4] Even though there were already several on-reservation day schools, the federal authorities realized that so long as children returned to their families by the end of the day, it would be impossible to 'Americanize' them. The federal government understood the value of family bonds to Native Americans and, as a result, "kinship was *specifically* targeted by colonial authorities in their efforts to destroy Indigenous communities" (Justice 2018: 58, emphasis original). Isolating the children away from the influences of their communities was the first step taken to "remake Indians in the image of white American citizens" (Calloway 2006: 336). Evidently, the long-term goal of the boarding school policy was to erase Indigenous knowledge and identity altogether by breaking the ties between the young generations and their elders and ancestors. Although most families tried to resist the federal government by hiding their children, those who lived in especially meager conditions agreed to send their children to schools just for economic benefits. In *The Night Watchman*, Thomas Wazhashk admits that he agreed to go just because "[t]he day schools on the reservation gave out just one meal. The government boarding school would feed three meals" (Ch.20). In other cases, tribal elders believed that they should send their children to adapt to and even exploit the white man's education (Coleman 1993: 64). As Wazhashk recalls, his father told him to "'Study hard because we need to know the enemy.' Over the years, he'd realized the wisdom of that" (Ch.53). Overall, Erdrich emphasizes that the boarding school experience was heart-wrenching for both the children and their parents:

> Thomas's mother [...] wept and hid her face as he went away. She had been torn—whether to cut his hair herself. They would cut his hair off at the school. And to cut hair meant someone had died. It was a way of grieving. Just before they left, she took a knife to his braid. She would hang it in the woods so the government would not be able to keep him [...]. The teacher showed him that he must place his hand on his heart and repeat words the other children already knew. All while staring at the flag. Thomas copied the teacher's words though he did not know what she was saying. (Ch.20)

It is taken as a given that education for Native Americans was basically an assimilative project, but off-reservation boarding schools took this goal to the extreme. "There [Native American children] were remade in Euro-American clothes and haircuts, [...] forced to renounce their religions and convert to Christianity" (McCollum 14). They were strictly forbidden from practicing any tribal rituals or using any tribal languages. Although it was natural for children to communicate with each other in their tribal languages, particularly when they could not speak English yet, they were severely punished. Michael Coleman argues that the insistence on speaking native languages and practicing other tribal traditions "should be seen as cultural resistance to school demands for total rejection of the tribal past" (1993: 151). Even if they did not recognize such behavior as resistance, students were thus able to uphold their tribal oral heritage and their Indigenous

identity. This is demonstrated in the novel whenever Wazhashk speaks to his father or to his old friends and finds himself "more expressive and comical in his original language" (Ch.11). Interestingly, Wazhashk makes use of his tribal knowledge as well as his Western education; when he is "Watching the night sky, he was Thomas who had learned about the stars in boarding school. He was also Wazhashk who had learned about the stars from his grandfather, the original Wazhashk" (Ch.3). Erdrich seems to be implying that those who attended boarding schools and survived, did so only because they were capable of forming a hybrid identity that enabled them to overcome the traumatic experience of assimilation.

Given that off-reservation boarding schools had a military nature, violations of school rules were taken very seriously and severe forms of punishment were imposed on children. In addition to violent beatings, school administrations often "imprison[ed] students in the guardhouse" (Adams 1995: 121). This is what happens to Roderick when he is caught stealing from the school bakery where he used to work. "He was fired. So he no longer cared and all the bad he had resisted came right out. He ran away. Again and again. He became a runner. That's how he ended up in the cellar and got so cold" (Ch.70). Erdrich re-envisions the traumatic experience of Native American children in Roderick's conversations with Wazhashk where they reveal that Roderick got the tuberculosis in one of those times that he was thrown down in the infested cellar (Ch.30). "The look of Roderick when he was brought up the stairs, blinking, terrified, shaking, coughing, haunted. Half dead already" (Ch.53) emphasizes how painful the experience of boarding school was for all the children; those who were punished and those who merely witnessed the punishment were forever traumatized. Like many Native American children back then, Roderick was brought home from his boarding school in a coffin. He attributes his restlessness after death to the fact that he died away from the reservation: "he died in Sac and Fox country, too far away to meet the deadline for Chippewa heaven. So he followed his coffin home and just hung around" (Ch.74). Through Roderick's ghost, Erdrich manages to write back to boarding school violence and to give voice to the hundreds who died without having any explanation for being kept away from their families:

> It was after his death that [Roderick] found out the term. What they were up to. Assimilation. Their ways become your ways [...] When they shaved his head and it grew out all fuzzy and spiky, Roderick sort of liked it. Like fur, he ran his hand over it. There were certain things he really went for. Canned peaches. But not the hard shoes. The trumpet. But not before sunrise. A warm woolen jacket. Wool socks. But then again, if they hadn't killed them off he could have had a curly buffalo jacket. And curly buffalo socks. Tuberculosis. For sure, he didn't like that. Did they have illness in the old days? He hadn't heard of any and he had to wonder. What did Indians use to die of? (Ch.74)

From Roderick's point of view the reader knows that some children did enjoy certain aspects of their boarding school experience. However, the above quotation also implies that most of those aspects already had traditional alternatives. For

instance, the curly buffalo socks and jackets were readily provided by the hunting season before white settlers brutally killed the buffalo and alienated people like Roderick and Wazhashk who started to identify themselves as the "after-the-buffalo-who-are-we-now generation" (Ch.17).

Several children who graduated boarding schools "[made] use of the English language to bear witness to the anguish of the school experience" (Katanski 2005: 6) and wrote autobiographies that documented and reflected on their experiences (Charles Alexander Eastman, a Santee Dakota; Zitkala-Ša, a Yankton Sioux; Francis La Flesche, an Omaha, to name a few). Contrary to the government's aspirations, Native Americans recreated the old bonds with their tribes and shared their stories and experiences; "the suppressed truths couldn't remain hidden forever" (Justice 2018: 85). Ironically, then, by providing Native American children with knowledge and expertise, the US government inadvertently enabled them to co-exist in mainstream American society. Even though students were severely punished for practicing any tribal traditions, some of them persisted and managed to "generate positive intertribal community" (Porter 2005: 53), which eventually gave rise to "a Pan-Indian identity at the turn of the twentieth century" (Katanski 2005: 8). But this does not mean that the boarding school experience was not traumatic for Native American children who would always remember the brutal system that experimented with them in the name of civilization and assimilation. Erdrich emphasizes how children were haunted by the memory of that experience through Roderick who remembers his boarding school teacher once he sees Senator Watkins on the day of the congressional hearing:

> Watkins was the teacher who'd taught the Palmer Method, the little man who'd whacked his hands with the ruler's edge, who'd pulled his ears, who'd screeched at him, who'd called him hopeless, who'd punished him for talking Indian. Watkins was the man who'd dragged Roderick to the cellar stairs and said to Thomas, 'Would you care to join your friend?' (Ch.83)

Roderick and the Termination Policy

The official philosophy behind the termination policy was the government's attempt to create an egalitarian society where no special privileges are granted to any minority group (Fixico 2002: 387). Ironically, the long history of dispossession and dislocation was the perfect pretext for advocates of the termination who claimed that the main goal of that policy was to compensate Native Americans for their previous losses and to "liberate [them] from the stifling atmosphere of reservation life and dependence on government support" (Calloway 2006: 407). But as Erdrich shows, Thomas Wazhashk and his people recognize well that ending federal support to their reservation is actually an attempt to 'ex-terminate' them (Ch.16). As they understand it, the termination policy would abolish all previous agreements according to which they were offered funding and services by the government in exchange for their land, "Long as the grass grows and the rivers flow" (Ch.23). As

a consequence, Native Americans would be normal citizens with no special services, rights or privileges accorded to them previously as sovereign nations.

As a writer who knows how to "create and follow 'tracks' to the past to help liberate succeeding generations" (Coulombe 2011: 19), Erdrich uses magical realism to create a panoramic view of Native American traumatic histories of removal, disease, allotment, boarding schools, and termination. Her emphasis on the continuity of the past is highlighted when she allows Roderick to participate in the fight against termination before he finally finds home in the company of other Native American ghosts. Likewise, Thomas Wazhashk looks for a plan to fight termination by searching the history of his people's struggle against the allotment policy that took their land. In Wazhashk's conversation with his father, the notion of pan-Indian collective identity is stressed: "We got together on it. Stuck together on it. Aisens, Miskobiness, Ka-ish-pa, all of them [...] We confronted them [...]. Then we put up a delegation" (Ch.23). Wazhashk is inspired by the elders' relentless resistance and immediately decides to put together a delegation, which further accentuates the continuity of Indigenous experience. Wazhashk is also inspired by the unearthly ancestors who descend from the sky to hold a traditional powwow. Dancing with the ghosts of his ancestors motivates Wazhashk to continue thinking about what he should do to prevent the termination of his tribe. To further highlight the "belief in perpetuity [and power] of the spirit" (Stirrup 2010: 98), Erdrich gives Roderick a chance to participate in the future of his people by allowing him to join the Turtle Mountain delegation to Congress. The chapter that depicts the delegates' statement in Congress is modeled after actual congressional records, starting from its title, "*Termination of Federal Contracts and Promises Made with Certain Tribes of Indians*," to the preamble:

JOINT HEARING
BEFORE THE[...]
SUBCOMMITTEES OF THE
COMMITTEES ON
INTERIOR AND INSULAR AFFAIRS
CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES
EIGHTY-THIRD CONGRESS
SECOND SESSION
PART 12
TURTLE MOUNTAIN INDIANS, NORTH DAKOTA
MARCH 2 AND 3, 1954
STATEMENT OF THOMAS WAZHASHK,
. . .
JEWEL BEARING PLANT EMPLOYEES,
A GHOST, A PHD CANDIDATE,
AND A STENOGRAPHER
(Ch.83, emphasis added)[5]

Erdrich here juxtaposes "historical [...] reality with elements of the fantastic" (Henn 2005: 104) to challenge the authoritative history imposed on Native Americans.

By adding Roderick's name to the official record of the hearing, Erdrich emphasizes the significant role that Native ancestors play in creating a viable future for their descendants (Justice 2018: 140).

Jenny Edkins argues that "the memory of catastrophic events [...] provide[s] specific openings for resistance to centralized political power" (2006: 101). The empowering feature of traumatic memories assists Wazhashk on the day of the hearing when he is scared of losing the battle against termination. Wazhashk reminds himself of an effective survival strategy from his old days in boarding school: "stick with it, don't let him give you the teacher-eye ... and suddenly Roderick was in the room" (Ch.83). At this critical moment in the history of the tribe, and when Wazhashk's leadership is put to the most challenging test, the conjuring of Roderick emphasizes the Indigenous firm belief in the motivational force of ancestor spirits. The only escape out of their crisis is revealed to Wazhashk through a silent conversation between himself and Roderick as they recall their boarding school memories. This motivational conversation takes place during the hearing when Wazhashk feels that he is already losing the battle. Roderick reminds him of old schools days: "Remember how you buttered that white teacher up to the teeth? Called him sir, sir this, sir that, thanked him constantly, asked his advice. Then stole the keys from his suit pocket? Then you let me out [of the cellar] and slipped back the keys" (Ch.83). The powerful presence of Roderick reminds Wazhashk of their old survival strategies at school and encourages him to continue to struggle. In a sense, Roderick is "the embodiment of the fierce, desperate hope and relentless insistence of [Native] ancestors to continue on in whatever way they could" (Justice 2018: 115).

Conclusion

Erdrich's "restoring and restory-ing" of the shared traumatic histories of her people is indeed "an important act of resistance and community building" (Justice 2018: 140, 85–86). Instead of portraying Native Americans merely as victims whose rights as humans have been grossly and repeatedly violated, Erdrich shows them as perseverant entities who have survived many crises throughout their history. In addition to the termination bill that stands as the direct historical context of the novel, *The Night Watchman* is replete with allusions to other traumatic events such as government boarding schools, the Allotment act, the trafficking of Native American women, and the battle of the *Little Bighorn*. Erdrich's constant examinations of key events in the history of her people confirm her insistence on remembering and reevaluating Native American struggle against "the violent histories and continuing practices of settler colonialism" (Justice: 2018 11). By adopting a magical realist narrative point of view, Erdrich manages to create a panoramic view of Native American history over the course of nearly 79 years to remind the younger generations of their past and to rekindle their sense of communal identity.

To show the repercussions of the oppressive federal policies on the very existence of Native Americans, Erdrich uses ghosts, fantastic elements, and native

mythology to recall haunting collective memories of physical and symbolic displacement. By juxtaposing the past and the present, Erdrich manages to bring back tangible, painful memories in a manner that Native Americans would understand due to the mythic nature of Indigenous cultural heritage. In *The Night Watchman* Erdrich puts a particular emphasis on Native ancestors as valuable and authoritative sources of knowledge and wisdom, particularly when it comes to their endless struggle against "colonial land hunger and displacement policies" (Justice 2018: 190). Erdrich's matter-of-fact magical realist narrative mode significantly highlights the power of tribal myths and oral traditions in preserving and revitalizing Native identity.

Notes

[1] On a quest initiated by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in 2010 to trace the ancestry of a number of influential Americans who come from different backgrounds, Louise Erdrich had the chance to do extensive research on the history of her ancestors. As one of the twelve figures who were asked to participate in this project, Erdrich has discovered a lot about both her German and Native American ancestors. Particularly, Erdrich seems to have been deeply impressed by the history of her maternal Ojibwe grandfather, Patrick Gourneau, that she decided to put him at the center of her most recent novel, *The Night Watchman* (2020). In fact, Erdrich has incorporated much of the findings of her project with Gates in *The Night Watchman*. As she has revealed to Gates, Erdrich was particularly impressed with the personality of her grandfather who insisted on gathering his people to fight the federal government's policy of termination in the 1950s. A careful scrutiny of his personal letters helped Erdrich understand that her grandfather "recognized [the termination] that this would be the end of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa as a people" (Gates 2010: 82).

[2] The other ghost that appears in the novel, Falon, is Thomas Wazhashk's brother who is killed in World War II. Unlike Roderick, Falon, only makes silent, brief apparitions in his olive greatcoat to Wazhashk, and then disappears "like a mist" (Erdrich ch.18). A possible interpretation for his minor role in the novel could be attributed to the fact that Falon dies for a just cause, i.e., to defend his country. Accordingly, he might be seen as a reminder of what Native Americans keep giving to the country that keeps subjugating them.

[3] The Allotment Act of 1887 divided the land formerly held in common by Native Americans into many small individual allotments. See: Porter (2005: 53).

[4] The idea for off-reservation boarding schools was initiated by General Richard Henry Pratt who established the Carlisle Industrial School in 1879 primarily to educate adult Native American prisoners of war (Calloway 2006: 345). Considered a great success, the Carlisle model became "the prototype for federal off-reservation Indian boarding schools designed to destroy tribal nations and strip Native children of their cultures, languages, and religions" (Katanski 2005: 2).

[5] Erdrich mentions in the Author's Notes to *The Night Watchman* that her grandfather – though given a fictional name – and Senator Arthur V. Watkins of Utah are the only real characters in the novel, all the rest are fictional. In the chapter on the congressional hearing, Erdrich also mentions that she has included Senator Watkins's original remarks quoted directly from the official congressional record.

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