

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA GRADUATE COLLEGE

BLOOD AND WATER, SURVIVANCE AND KINSHIP: HOW ANISHINAABE CULTURE IN
TRACKS REVEALS THE POWER OF CHOSEN FAMILY

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Norman, Oklahoma
2025

BLOOD AND WATER, SURVIVANCE AND KINSHIP: HOW ANISHINAABE CULTURE IN
TRACKS REVEALS THE POWER OF CHOSEN FAMILY

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Because family is so immediate to us, it has enormous capability to be the source of struggle in our lives— and when family fails, the consequences can be cataclysmic. Louise Erdrich’s 1988 novel *Tracks* demonstrates the ways Anishinaabe kinship structures become threatened by settler-colonial violence. I analyze historical 20th century Anishinaabe values and practices and connect them to character relationships in the novel. I also discuss how Erdrich’s novel can be seen as a response to then-President Reagan’s callback to family values which was modeled off the short-lived but powerfully nostalgic family values of the 1950s. *Tracks* can be viewed as a forceful intervention full of acceptance, belonging, and sovereignty that stands in stark contrast to the sought after family values that are rigid, private, and individualistic. I encapsulate these kinds of settler-colonial family structures with the phrase “blood runs thicker than water.” This paper also focuses on how characters use Native practices like story-telling to stay resilient, connected, and tradition-based. Stories preserve memory, reflect on events, and instill wisdom. Stories by the very people who directly experience the impacts of myths perpetuated by colonialism can combat them, tell them, and create their own stories that are more reflective of Native peoples realities. Because they are so integral to culture and because of the colonial violences actively working against Native Americans, having stories and people to share them with is a direct form of survivance and a crucial part of kinship.

KEYWORDS: *Tracks*, Louise Erdrich, Native storytelling, Anishinaabe kinship, survivance, Ronald Reagan, chosen family

“WINTER 1912” - INTRODUCTION

Family is an essential value and institution for most people, but not everyone agrees on what constitutes family. Louise Erdrich’s (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians of North Dakota) 1988 novel *Tracks* is a novel centered around settler-colonial threats to an Anishinaabe community and their response. It challenges Euramerican definitions of family and celebrates unity in the midst of concerted community disruption. The story is about a man named Nanapush (a variant of an Anishinaabe name meaning heroic trickster) who, upon rescuing a girl from drowning, finds himself with a new family member. Fleur Pillager and Nanapush have no family left when they meet, but they have each other. When Fleur has a child (whom Nanapush names after his own dead daughter, Lulu) Nanapush and his new lover care for Lulu until she is sent away to a federal Indian boarding school. Nanapush’s narrations are dedicated to untangling the complicated reasons Lulu’s mother has sent her away to boarding school and to dissuade her from an impending marriage to someone from the Morrissey family. *Tracks* is also an adoption narrative set during a time when Native families were thrust into chaos and separation because of assimilationist settler practices.

Tracks’s exegesis begins at short stories that appeared across three magazine publications before it was published. During this time Erdrich was engaged in a cultural battle between Native Americans and colonial forces almost 70 years after her characters were. *Tracks* can be viewed as a forceful intervention full of acceptance, belonging, and sovereignty that stands in stark contrast to the sought after family values of the 1950s that Ronald Reagan praised during his presidency, during which he earnestly and frequently advocated for a return to the nuclear family. Reagan’s focus on the “traditional” family values that harkened back to the 50s paired with his hostile and condescending remarks about Native Americans makes for interesting context when

reading Native literature of the 80s (including the works of American Indian authors like Paula Gunn Allen, N. Scott Momaday, and Leslie Marmon Silko's).¹

Tracks is written with two alternating narrators, Nanapush and Pauline. The first narrator of *Tracks*, Nanapush, begins the novel by speaking about his tribe, the Ojibwe (a tribe of the Anishinaabe, which makes up several Canadian and Northern U.S. tribes including the Odawa and Potawatomi), being killed en masse by diseases like smallpox and consumption. Nanapush narrates in the winter of 1912. Death has already engulfed the town and the devastation of disease continues its quick spread. By a half-decade later the Spanish flu would hit and the Native American population would be decreased by nearly seventy percent (Hedgpeth). Nanapush becomes Fleur's caretaker when he nurses her back to health after her family is killed by smallpox. Nanapush, characterized by his suggestive humor, situational observations, and eloquent stories, is a surrogate father to the recently orphaned Fleur. At twice her age, Nanapush is considered old by Anishinaabe standards, for disease has drastically cut down life expectancy. The book establishes early on that Fleur is a powerful presence. She is known by the villagers for her sorcery, strength, and beauty. Fleur's intense, in every facet of her life and at every stage—she is a fierce mother, a defender of her native homeland, and she seeks vengeance against those who hurt her or people she loves.

The second narrator of *Tracks* is Pauline, a young mixed-race Anishinabeg and French girl who is part of the Puyat family. Like many of the character's in *Tracks*, Pauline is a complex person that resists simple generalizations. Her character can be described as antagonistic due to her rejection of Anishinaabe practices and her propensity to lie. There are also numerous times throughout the novel when her actions result in grievous harm, like when she bewitches Fleur's

¹ The growth of Native American literature was also coined the Native American Renaissance in 1983 by Native and English literature scholar Kenneth Lincoln (adopted into the Oglala Sioux).

partner into having an affair, and when her incompetence during Fleur's sudden early labor during her second pregnancy results in a stillbirth. However, Pauline is simultaneously a sympathetic character due to the traumas she has endured like seeing Fleur get raped and being powerless to stop it (at least, not without risking being raped herself, or even killed). Pauline is fixated on being a member of the white Catholic church, so much so that she begins to engage in acts of religious scrupulousness and asceticism that make even the convent's Mother Superior uncomfortable. She is simultaneously holier-than-thou and riddled with self-loathing. Through Pauline's narrations the reader gets an idea of the kind of behavior that makes Anishinaabe acceptance dwindle and what kind of betrayals to her Native American identity she has to enact in order to be accepted by the settler-colonial Catholic missionaries.

Community and family were cherished values among the Anishinaabe when *Tracks* was set in the early 1900s and have remained Anishinaabe cultural imperatives. The practice of creating a community of people who do not have biological or legal ties with one another for primary support is called "chosen family."² This relationship is mutual, strengthening, validating, and fosters belonging. In this paper, it is my goal to explore how powerful this concept of chosen family can be for Native American individuals and communities and how it facilitates survivance, in contrast with the prototypical settler/colonizer family seen in American families circa the 1950s. I will also talk about how the practice of storytelling, specifically as seen in Nanapush's character, connects and binds the web of chosen family, thus serving a crucial role in Native American survivance.

Native literature oftentimes seeks to explore balance, wholeness, relatedness and harmony (Allen 268). It has undergone a distinct and grueling journey in academia due to the

² For more information on the origins of chosen family as a kinship term used especially in queer communities, check out the book written by the woman who is credited with coining the term: *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* by Kath Weston, Columbia University Press (1997).

pernicious Western tendency to discount non-Western forms of literature, including the oral tradition, as foreign or primitive. Instead, readers of Native works should read mindfully, making note of connections, threads that form an overarching web, and significant lessons in stories that are often oversimplified (Powell 479). Major themes in indigenous literature often include honoring and remembering the past in a doubled sense: the past contains freedom in tribal identity and expression but it also contains impositions and violations in the form manifest destiny, federal control, coerced assimilation, targeted murder, and other genocidal actions. Central to native literary theory are concepts such as intellectual sovereignty, decolonization, nationalism, tribalogy that further and support Native resistance.

One crucial aspect of Native literature and critical literary theory is survivance, a term coined by Gerald Vizenor (Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, White Earth Reservation) in *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (1999). In his own words, it is “an active sense of presence, the continuance of Native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry. Survivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense, the estate of native survivancy.” (Vizenor 7) Despite *Manifest Manners* being written over ten years after *Tracks*, Vizenor's scholarship has been influential for Erdrich's other texts. Because of its literary influence and cultural relevance, I apply survivance to *Tracks*. Native American history is steeped in trauma, but trauma is not the defining characteristic of Native Americans. In fact, these Native stories remind readers that there is so much more to indigeneity than the colonial interference they have endured. One could even argue that focusing solely on trauma caused by colonizers centers the perpetrators of violence and prolongs the false portrayal of Native Americans as victims and victims alone. Even though it is imperative that trauma is not forgotten, it should not be the

hallmark of Native American existence, especially while so much beauty, humor, imagination, and life persists. In Native survivance stories, trauma is present because survival entails a recovery from some kind of violence, grief, or uprooting. But more inherent in survival is the ingenuity, resilience, and power in the ones surviving. Native survivance stories celebrate, teach, and instill these qualities. My exploration of the complexities of chosen family will be conducted with primarily Indigenous research.

In “The Novel as Performance: Communication in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*”, James Flavin discusses how communication functions in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* and how Erdrich writes a novel that “explores the relationship between communication and those oral traditions which are central to its survival” (2). Flavin directs our attention to Nanapush as oral narrator and listener as he “sits before a specific audience to tell his story” capturing the “sense of oral performance” (2). In doing so, Nanapush re-creates the history of his family and looks to Lulu to preserve the future of cultural survival or destruction. Nanapush utilizes his bilingual speech as a form of survival. His oral abilities are medicinal, magical, powerful, and bonding. Flavin focuses on how Nanapush uses his voice to cure himself and other people in his community as they suffer through hardships like disease and starvation. Voice is associated with power, control, selfhood, and strength and shifts based on the character he’s interacting with. As he narrates the story to Lulu, it’s associated with self-preservation as it keeps him alive. His words “combine the elements of song and rhythm, traditional elements in Anishinaabe ritual. Still later, in a ceremony designed to heal Fleur’s spirit, Nanapush concocts a protective paste ‘with exact words said’ (Erdrich 188)” (Flavin 7).

Lastly, Flavin points out how Nanapush’s language is generative, specifically in the way that he can use it in the spirit world to provide for the family: “he becomes a vehicle through

which the spiritual and physical worlds are brought into harmony” (10). Community building, bonding, and relationality are at the core of Nanapush’s vocal abilities. Flavin then goes on to argue that Nanapush is concerned with perpetuating tribal traditions, which is why he “distinguishes between oral language and print as modes of communication” (10). “For Nanapush, the oral tradition links human to human, past to present, physical to spiritual” and the print tradition is in opposition to this as it is a “medium of white culture” (10). Nanapush associates print with bureaucratic processes that threaten to take allotment land. Overall, Flavin argues that the novel focuses on the importance of language and oral traditions to “tribal culture,” and this is most evident in the sections that Nanapush narrates because of the various powers associated with his spoken word (11-12).

Though many of the Anishinaabe are killed by disease in *Tracks* opening chapter, Napaush and Fleur live. “We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall. It was surprising there were so many of us left to die” (*Tracks* 1). Their relationship is rooted in survival, and Nanapush seems to be the epitome of bravery and resilience in the first several pages of the book as he makes the trek out of his town, which has been burned down and ravaged by disease. He breaks into the Pillager household to see if anyone is alive and finds adolescent Fleur, already sick, near the bodies of her dead family members. Despite his fear of the frozen bodies in front of him, he touches them and wishes the deceased a successful journey into the spirit realm. While the other villagers and tribal police refuse to touch Fleur out of fear and cultural taboo, Nanapush stays by her side and covers her in blankets. As they are journeying out of the town, Fleur is tossed off the sled into the snow multiple times, exacerbating her already severe illness. Nanapush may be afraid, but the rescue and subsequent care he provides Fleur is deliberate and almost instinctive. Despite his own (relative) old age and sickness, he drags Fleur

into his home and nurses her back to health with songs, stories, and the warmth of his own body. Because Fleur has no biological kin to help bury her dead family, Nanapush steps in and accepts this duty, praying over the permanently stilled bodies that house restless spirits.

In the burial of the Pillager family Nanapush carries out an act that's incredibly personal and intimate. By Euramerican standards he had no obligation to do this. But the idea of obligation is a subjective one, determined by culture, upbringing, religious beliefs, our personal, moral, financial and material limits and innumerable other conditions. Many settler-Americans feel they have an obligation to their immediate family before other members of the community because the two are often distinct from one another. But this kind of "obligation" is operating on white standards, not Anishinaabe ones (as seen in Nanapush's burial of Fleur's family and her subsequent adoption). In this essay I borrow sociologists Lindsey and Beach's textbook (literally) definition of nuclear family, which "consists of wife, husband, and their dependent children who live apart from other relatives in their own residence" (Fitzgerald 143). This, in conjunction with patriarchal attitudes, which are often based in conservative Christian thought and misplaced nostalgia, makes up a kind of settler/colonial family structure that I will be critiquing during this essay.

The extent of my knowledge is limited. I am a non-Native living on stolen land and it was not until my undergraduate years of college that I began my studies of Nativeness. Being in Indigenous Rhetorics and Literature at the University of Oklahoma has given me the privilege of being exposed to Native stories and taught me about Native traumas and genocidal actions such as colonization, allotment, rape, disease, boarding schools, paternalism, forced assimilation, and more. It has also unearthed constructive concepts like story, resistance, survivance, and decolonialist practices. In this essay I use Native stories and texts to guide my understanding and

research and will continue to do so long after the completion of this paper. I am indebted to the wisdom and scholarship of Louise Erdrich, Lawrence Gross, Rebecca Krugel, Gerald Vizenor and so many more. I vow to continue my commitment to learn about American Indian peoples, to intervene in abuse of them when asked, when necessary, and when appropriate, and I give credit to them for the way that storytelling and meaning-making is shaping my writing. I hope I can use this scholarship to contribute to the field of Indigenous studies and take all critiques seriously. This is my positionality.

“BLOOD RUNS THICKER THAN WATER.” - EURAMERICAN FAMILY VALUES

There’s a common phrase among Euramericans. The phrase, “Blood runs thicker than water,” comes from the medieval German story “*Reinhart Fuchs*” (Reynard the Fox). “*Ouch hoer ich sagen, das sippe blût von wazzere niht verdirbet,*” says a raven in the fable, conveying the sentiment that the waters of baptism are not strong enough to change traits most likely inherited through biology, such as personality. Now the phrase, which has remained popular in Western vernacular even hundreds of years later, is used to communicate that people connected via molecular bonds are closer to one another than our friends, the neighbor down the street, that middle school teacher who changed our lives. Blood (family, chosen family, blood quantum), story (Native survivance), and baptism (Christian beliefs mingled with or imposed on Native ones) are motifs woven throughout *Tracks* and this paper.

According to the lesson many Euramericans have been taught, blood runs thicker than water. Euramericans have the tendency to be highly selective with whom they recognize as family, at least in comparison to Native Americans. Since European settlers galumphed onto Native land, they have been baffled at the way Native Americans live. From hair length to traditional attire to spiritual practices, colonizers have been critical of Native American lifestyle,

deeming it savage and primitive. A major point of contention was family structure, where settlers documented they were surprised to learn that ““every man, woman, or child in Indian communities is allowed to enter any one’s lodge, and even that of the chief of the nation, and eat when they are hungry”” (Coontz 163). This sense of community was foreign to settlers who preferred privacy and autonomy, even to the detriment of their survival.

Of course, acceptance of extended families, adoption, and chosen family kinship systems are not exclusive to American Indians. Though embracing extended family to the extent many Native Americans do may not be a popular practice in individualistic cultures (like the U.S. and U.K.), it’s more widespread in other collectivist parts of the world, like sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. And for the past several decades, American cultural attitudes regarding the family structure have changed drastically, an unsurprising and undeniable statement due to factors such as the influx of immigrants and diversification of the U.S. population, hesitancy to abide by practices that seem outdated or patriarchal, the legalization of same-sex marriage, evolving attitudes about reproductive health and parenting, discourse on gender roles, and economic changes. Family trends no longer reflect the strict nuclear one that was reminiscent of the 50s or the 80s, when Ronald Reagan tried to return to that exclusive family structure as Louise Erdrich was conceptualizing, writing, and publishing *Tracks*.

What is it about the 1950s that sticks in the American mind? It conjures images of suburbs occupied by women in gingham aprons, men who drive shiny pastel cars and carry leather briefcases, boys who play with plastic army men and girls who rock baby dolls. When asked to imagine this era in United States history, I close my eyes and see a glossy page out of *Dick and Jane*, which reached its height of popularity during the 1950s. How is it that despite not being alive during this time, I have such a strong image of it? Modern nostalgia has the

bewitching ability to make Americans wistful for a family structure that, according to Stephanie Coontz, did not actually exist— at least, not for very long and not without a major sacrifice on behalf of one or more family members, most often mothers and children. This is the focus of her book *The Way We Never Were: American Families And The Nostalgia Trap* in which she discusses how many Americans have inaccurate ideas about the history of family structures and dynamics due to myths propagated by television, religious convictions, misunderstanding how families actually functioned throughout American history, inability to read data and trends, and wishful thinking.

Unfortunately, certain expectations and stereotypes from the 50s are still upheld, as seen in judgment towards single parents, divorced couples, children born out of wedlock, same-sex couples, single people, and unwed or childless couples. Since its propagation in the 50s, the settler/colonizer family (typically a heterosexual couple with biological children, traditionally same-race) has had a monumental grip on American consciousness. In fact, despite the changing trends, “under the U.S. Census Bureau definition, family households consist of two or more individuals who are related by birth, marriage, or adoption, although they also may include other unrelated people. Nonfamily households consist of people who live alone or who share their residence with unrelated individuals” (McFalls).

Complicating the idealized family structure of the 50s was the fact that many settler families owed their privileged way of life to Native Americans whose land was stolen or coerced from them as a result of colonial violence and government treaties. Systemic and structural violence enabled white upper-class families to live within the family-forward matrix of the 50s, while Native Americans, uprooted and displaced, attempted to implement their cultural customs in a country where the dominant population was actively erasing (seen in the federal government

funding land raids) and rejecting (acclimation of nuclear families) them. Even in the 30s and 40s more rights were afforded to Native Americans with the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 which advocated for preservation of tribal homelands and encouraged self-determination. But in the 50s and 60s the government focused on “the Indian Problem” with renewed malignant vigor. The federal government was pushing for Native termination, which refers to the government’s undertaking to assimilate Natives to settler/colonial life. In 1953 the Bureau of Indian Affairs implemented the Native American Urban Relocation program which advertised the perks that came with being favored (even though this program still aimed to weaken tribal sovereignty) as settlers were, including the modern necessities that came with urban life that were not afforded to Natives living in rural areas, such as employment. Miscegenation was encouraged and conversations about Native Americans were steeped in eugenics. And when Native Americans found that urban life was not for them, they found that “the BIA wouldn’t pay for people to return to their reservations. Relocation was a one-way trip” (Nesterack). Even as the BIA encouraged Native Americans to assimilate by promising an easier life, Natives *still* suffered from exclusionary housing policies like redlining that made suburban life suboptimal.

“BE CITIZENS ALONG WITH THE REST OF US.” - REAGAN’S FAMILY VALUES

At the time Erdrich wrote *Tracks*, the United States 40th president, Ronald Reagan, was reaching the end of his second term. Among Baby Boomers and Generation X has been a dedicated league of people who hold President Reagan to a standard of stardom, viewing him as the charismatic and optimistic candidate that served two successful terms. He dismantled “the evil empire” (Soviet Union), implemented “Reaganomics” (the efficacy of which is contested), and created millions of jobs for Americans. For many though, Reagan is remembered in infamy for his incompetence during the AIDs crisis, his opposition to labor unions, and launching the

war on drugs that disproportionately targeted Black Americans. His relationship with Native American communities was thorny as well (as a reminder: during his acting career he played Custer in the film *Santa Fe Trail*). Serving in the wake of the Red Power movement and Nixon's self-determination policies, Reagan implemented some policies (the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act...) that bolstered Native American economy and self-governance.

Here is what Reagan stood for: "It's in the family where we learn to think for ourselves, care for others, and acquire the values of self-reliance, integrity, responsibility, and compassion. Families stand at the center of society, so building our future must begin by preserving family values." But family in the 80s and family today is not the same as family in the 50s. It is more open, inclusive, and understanding of the realization that communities thrive when they rely on one another for support and guidance instead of yearning for "the good old days" (Coontz). This was a recognition Native Americans had long before America's colonization brought forth concepts of private values, independence, and identity rooted in the nuclear family. Fast forward to the 80s and colonization was still present, but repackaged into less overt forms of oppression. "Reagan's 'patronizing' tone aside, talk of integrating Indians into the mainstream harked back to the much-despised policies of the 1950s and 1960s, not the tribal-friendly trends of the 1970s and 1980s" (Kotlowski 61). This was the context in which Erdrich was publishing her short stories that would soon amalgamate into *Tracks*, a seminal work of the 80s.

He also had a history of making remarks that implied Native peoples owed the American government but remained ungrateful. This kind of exasperation shows a lack of effort to understand Native American ways of living on several fronts. First, it implies the government actually had Native American problems at the forefront of their concerns and were working to

better their situations based on Native American requests. Second, he neglects to mention that for all the help and education the government has provided Native Americans, it has spawned deleterious effects hundredfold. Then he fails to take into consideration the high number of Native Americans living in urban areas. His quote suggests that Native Americans who want to live in ways that don't align with settler-colonial practices deserve whatever misfortunes are inflicted upon them. By acquiescing, Reagan seemed to say, life would be easier. The data shows this to be false. According to a 2020 study that spanned 1959-2015 conducted at Penn State University, "cumulative disadvantages are important for American Indians, who are more likely to have lower levels of human capital, live in single parent families, and have a younger age structure and live in nonmetropolitan areas than other groups" (Iceland). Reagan's hands-off approach certainly did not mitigate these problems faced by Native Americans in the 80s.

When speaking at Moscow State University in 1988 Ronald Reagan declared support for "a system of constraints on power to keep politics and government secondary to the important things in life, the true sources of value found only in family and faith." During this same speech where he lauded faith and family values he was asked if he had heard that a group of Native Americans had followed him to Russia because he would not meet with them in the U.S.. His response: "we've done everything we can to meet their demands as to how they want to live. Maybe we made a mistake. Maybe we should not have humored them in that wanting to stay in that kind of primitive lifestyle. Maybe we should have said, no, come join us; be citizens along with the rest of us" ("The American Presidency Project"). This problematic and patronizing quote contains multitudes. It begins with a lie as Reagan suggests that the U.S. government has placated Native Americans despite the U.S. government itself being the source of many Native problems. The quote also contains a threat from Reagan who "jokes" that it was a mistake to

meet Native needs. Disturbingly, the suggestion here is that any complaint warrants a negative reaction (inappropriate jokes, revoking rights, continued ignorance of Native problems) instead of a serious contemplation of how he can do his job by aiding the marginalized and original population of the country. The remark that Native Americans were “humored” in their requests for sovereignty and equal status implies that such demands were never taken seriously. Lastly, the quote reinforces stereotypes that Native Americans are Others— are somehow separate from “civilized” Euramericans and inherently different. The racist implication is that their lifestyles (which vary greatly on a tribal and personal level) are primitive and homogenous. Clearly President Reagan did not have a reputation for sensitivity regarding Native American affairs and ultimately he relegated the responsibility to his aides.

In 1986 during the days leading up to Christmas, Reagan addressed the nation with a speech on family values. In his speech, peppered with imagery of wrapping presents and baby Jesus in a manger, Reagan implored Americans to appreciate the sanctity of family, which he suggested was under attack.

If you think about it, you'll see that it's in the family that we must all learn the fundamental lesson of life -- right and wrong, respect for others, self-discipline, the importance of knowledge, and, yes, a sense of our own self-worth. All of our lives, it's the love of our families that sustains us when times are hard. And it is perhaps above all to provide for our children that we work and save (Reagan).

Reagan's family-forward speeches of the 80s hearkened back to the 50s, when it was championed that family ought to be the unwavering stable center, the nucleus, of American life. At the head stood the masculine husband and authoritative father, at his side the acquiescent wife and attentive mother. Despite the fact that people in the 1950s claimed to be traditional, this kind

of pro-family lifestyle was actually “a new invention” (Coontz 26). New values, accepted behavior, and aspirational goals emerged during this time and the GDP, birth rate, wages, middle class, and number of homeowners were booming at unprecedented rates. Conversely, the gap in what was considered socially acceptable was narrowing. Gender roles were abided by staunchly with women prioritizing domestic labor and middle-class men worrying about their ability to control their spouses (Coontz 52). Television presented an idyllic and whitewashed version of reality in the U.S., which, in many pockets, was racially diverse and impoverished. In truth, the wealth of the 1950s didn’t negate the fact that low-income and non-white American families were struggling. Families of color grappled with racist legislation that stunted upward mobility while women who didn’t live up to 1950s expectations were labeled as neurotic or failures (Coontz 35).³ Domestic violence was “provoked” by women who failed to meet their husband’s unrealistic standards and demands. Reagan’s wishes for a return to family values was not the only thing that called back to the 50s: his “remarks on Indian policy recalled the era of termination in the 1950s, when policymakers acted to end the federal-Indian trust relationship. He compared a century of Indian policy to ‘paternalism’ and the federal government to a ‘foster parent’ whose ‘well-intentioned’ efforts had been a ‘colossal failure’” (Kotlowski 623).

During his presidency, Reagan encouraged reform, renewal, and revitalization in the form of bringing back a past era. He wanted Americans to embrace the family values of the 1950s, but what he was asking for wasn’t traditional at all— at least, not in the grand scheme of American history. Despite being the iconic symbol of family life for many Americans, the 1950s was a unique period of family history in terms of its rigid gender roles, division of labor, family autonomy and fixation with immediate nuclear family. It remains a powerful (and for many

³ Racist legislation at this time included Jim Crow laws, disenfranchisement methods, redlining, and more. Richard Rothstein’s *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (2017) covers examples of racist legislation in detail.

people, particularly conservatives) positive image in American culture, but the existence of these things did and does not equal equality or satisfaction.⁴ Suffering, inequity, exclusion, and poverty still existed in the 1950s— even if the media or highly privileged families said otherwise.

Furthermore, the tight-knit and exclusive family dynamic that trended during the 1950s had decreased in popularity during the 80s. Despite Reagan’s desire for a 1950s return to family, in 1989 in a national poll “seventy-four percent declared, instead, that family is any group whose members love and care for one another” (Coontz 19). The American public’s ideas about family in the 80s was incompatible with the *Dick and Jane* zeitgeist of the 50s. Furthermore, by embracing Reagan’s 50s style family, entire populations would have been excluded due to cultural and social differences. Would this 1950s arrangement be open to adoption, as was common in Ojibwe culture? Would it be accepting of two-spirit Ojibwes? Multiracial households? Would it be accepting of the extramarital sexual practices that we see in *Tracks*?

“FLEUR,” “SNARES,” AND “MATCHIMANITO” - *TRACKS* AS SHORT STORIES

Family and politics are common themes in Louise Erdrich’s works. In fact, Erdrich has made it a habit in her novels to be critical of political forces, an unsurprising (and perhaps inescapable) technique seeing as her stories focus on nativeness and being Native is inherently political as their bodies, land, beliefs, and blood are constant sources of legislation. Apparatuses like government boarding schools, Christian fundamentalism, political bans, protests, marches, the U.S. military, and reproductive healthcare are featured in her novels as responses to Erdrich’s ancestral or lived reality. Though Erdrich’s works have elements of fantasy, the stories themselves are oftentimes grounded in real past and current events in the U.S. as well

⁴ A comment from Donald Trump at a campaign rally in 2024: “...the family is really the foundation of a prosperous and good society... We really have the same values. All of us are united around those beliefs. We believe that faith in God and our Judeo-Christian values are essential to a healthy American society. We believe in family. We believe in parental rights” (Trump). It’s hard to believe the sincerity of his claim with his plans to “carry out the largest domestic deportation operation in American history”, an act that would separate and harm families (“Trump On Immigration”). As of 2024, six million people under the age of 18 live with an undocumented immigrant.

Anishinaabe folklore. For Erdrich, community is inspiration for stories, mobilization against oppressive forces, and wisdom for navigating life and surviving. All of these themes are present in *Tracks*.

The 80s was a phenomenal decade with authors like Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie, and Haruki Murakami publishing bestsellers. It was also the decade that Tom Clancy, known for his Cold War pro-America novels, published multiple bestsellers and even dedicated some of them to Ronald Reagan, a reader and fan of Clancy's patriotic novels. Despite Erdrich's rise in popularity and recognition of her talent in the past several decades, none of her works made bestselling lists in the 80s— in fact, there were no Native American authors with best sellers in the 80s. Instead, the exegesis of *Tracks* was a set of three short stories published during the 80s across three notable publications before it became the award-winning novel readers know today. When each work was published, Erdrich was the only Native American author (and one of two women) out of over a dozen total authors featured on the front pages.

First was "Matchimanito" in *The Atlantic Monthly* followed by "Fleur" in *Esquire Magazine* and finished with "Snares" in *Harper's*. "Matchimanito" begins with a condemnation of the government which has stolen Native land and left its inhabitants to die. The ten-page story is nearly identical to the first chapter of *Tracks*, but this one begins with death ("we started dying before the snow...") and ends with survival ("Fleur groaned, drew the baby to her breast, and lived.") ("Fleur" pp. 1-10). The reader now has a vested interest in the future of these characters and their expanding family, who only several pages ago were orphaned and on the brink of death. Interestingly, this short story refrains from the use of second-person narration that appears in its congruent chapter in the novel. Erdrich's decision emphasizes a difference in audience. The audience of "Matchimanito" is a settler-colonial one, a white demographic who read the

“Atlantic” during the 80s and likely did not consume much Native literature. In the novel’s first couple of Nanapush-narrated chapters, the language is more personal and geared towards Lulu in the form of direct addresses. There is also an element of heightened sensitivity in the way Margaret talks about and welcomes her granddaughter. In both novel and story there’s speculation about Lulu’s father, but the novel spends more time focusing on how Lulu’s unexpected birth disrupts the community but brings with it love and connection. With Lulu being the primary recipient of the story, this positive emphasis on her arrival makes sense.

“Fleur” is narrated by Pauline, who in *Tracks* is an unreliable narrator but serves as a more omniscient one in the short-story rendering. Yet again the story conveys survival as it opens with speculation on how Fleur has evaded drowning in the lake three times. Pauline, the sanctimonious and complicated antagonist of *Tracks*, observes Fleur as a removed narrator, not interacting with her but letting the reader in on the town’s superstitions of Fleur’s powers and clandestine relationship with the lake’s monster. Fleur is an oppositional force when situated alongside Nanapush; while Nanapush compels survival in the midst of death, Fleur leaves death in her sorcerous wake. Nanapush rescues Fleur. His retrieval of her from the brink of death results in Fleur’s union with Eli, Nanapush’s relationship with Margaret (Eli’s mother), and of course the birth of Lulu. By contrast, Fleur is an unnerving and mysterious woman because of her alleged liaisons with the water monster, described as “the thing of death by drowning, the death a Chippewa cannot survive” (“Fleur” 52). But she does survive. Men notice this remarkable feat and avoid Fleur as her conquest of near-death experiences coincides with the unfortunate demise of those who witnessed them. Pauline is described as a shadow, a presence townspeople are aware of but not one they interact with. And like a shadow, Pauline is a passive bystander when Fleur is raped in retaliation by the Argus men who resent losing their money to

Fleur while gambling. In the novel this is a traumatizing moment that haunts Pauline's nightmares. In the short story and book, Pauline's final rumination that takes the form of a dream is revealing. In it she returns home to her tribal land and "except for talking to [her] cousins, lives a quiet life" ("Fleur" 56). If dreams are indeed indicative of the physical world as the Anishinaabe believe,⁵ Pauline has a chance of living among her tribe— perhaps still a shadowed figure, but one that visits Fleur (Simpson).

"Snares", the last of the short-story publications that would become *Tracks*, begins with a survival of sorts as Nanapush and Fleur refuse to sign away their land to a government agent in exchange for cash. The Morrissey family retaliates by trapping Nanapush and Margaret and shaving Margaret's head. Nanapush observes the scene with sharp discernment: "I saw in his eyes that he intended us great harm. I saw his greed. It was like watching an ugly design of bruises come clear for a moment and reconstructing the evil blows that made them" ("Snares" 61). After this moment, I argue that Fleur welcomes Margaret into the familial fold. Without a word she chops her own braids and leaves to seek revenge on behalf of both characters. At the end of the story revenge is complete, Lazarre falling into Fleur's magical and physical snare. In these short stories and the subsequent novel, Erdrich "does not present a rose-colored view of an ideal nuclear family in the manner of television series such as *Little House on the Prairie* or the Depression-era drama *The Waltons*, but rather a completely unsentimental view, both affectionate and angry, of an extremely complicated extended family" (114 Silberman). Indeed, the *Tracks* tetralogy encapsulates a wide and realistic range of feeling where there's belonging, romance, companionship, intimacy, and humor. But betrayal, emotional and physical pain

⁵ For more information on Anishinaabe dreams as a source of knowledge "The Island of the Anishinaabeg: Thunderers and Water Monsters in the Traditional Ojibwe Life-World" by Theresa S. Smith

(accidental and purposely inflicted), haunting, trauma, grief, and abandonment make their presence known as well.

“PEOPLE STICK TOGETHER HERE.” - ANISHINAABE KINSHIP STRUCTURES

In contrast to the private sphere of the home and value of autonomy that the original European settlers had according to Coontz, “the continued existence and welfare of the tribe may be regarded as more important than individual rights, and individuals may belong to a web of kinship defined more by clan or other kinship groups than by the nuclear family. For example, some Indian languages do not distinguish between the word for ‘mother’ and the word for ‘aunt’” (Adams). Many of these family and kinship structures are reflected in Nanapush, who describes himself as “a vine of a wild grape that twined the timbers and drew them close. Or maybe I was a branch, coming from the Kashpaws, that lived long enough to touch the next tree over, which was Pillagers, of whom there were only two-Moses and Fleur-far cousins, related not so much by blood as by name and chance survival” (*Tracks* 33). As he says, his connection with the others is not contingent on blood relations. What relates them is shared experiences and mutual bonding. They are expected to look out for one another, consult each other on important decisions, and help with child rearing. For transgressors like Pauline who are influenced by colonial powers to the detriment of her community, relatedness and connection are withheld. She makes herself a threat to her community by prioritizing a colonial version of Catholicism that degrades Native American ways of being. Indeed, even the fact that she is of mixed descent causes her to view herself as more pure than her full blooded counterparts. In contrast, Nanapush and Fleur make a united force, a web that keeps like-minded Ojibwe together when survival is uncertain. The web motif exists in Erdrich’s life and works as well as she weaves her raw and

emotionally-fraught stories. “I have a very large family, and I feel surrounded by ancestors and family and our complications, love, and unity” (Erdrich).

Let us return to the limitations of blood. The conversation about Native American family and kinship cannot occur without some discussion of blood quantum, which breaks down the Native American and determines how much and what kind of Native blood an individual has. With the federal invention of blood quantum in the 18th century, tribal systems complicated Native American family life. In this system of categorization, Native identity is decided based on a fraction and the government’s classification system is prioritized against the wishes of many Native American tribes. The disturbing justification behind such an idea was that “over time, Indians would literally breed themselves out and rid the federal government of their legal duties to uphold treaty obligations” (Rule, quoted in Chow). By tracking Native ancestry the federal government could decide who they would exclude from citizenship, who was eligible to receive allotments, and could also be used to “disempower Indigenous people and separate them from their lands, resources, culture, identities, languages, and futures” (Native Governance Center). Blood quantum has been a controversial topic since its introduction to Native life, but thanks to tribal sovereignty, individual tribes can determine what makes someone a member of their tribe or how much credence they want to give blood quantum. Today about 70% of federally recognized Native American tribes use blood quantum (measured by tribe or simply Native ancestry) to determine citizenship, but some tribes are concerned with the effects imposing blood quantum on tribes can have (Native Governance Center). So strong was this belief that tribe members decide citizenship that in 2007 White Earth Anishinabeg convened to create their own constitution that reflected their own ideas of tribal citizenship. For example, in an interview Doefler conducted, White Earth William “Bill” Anywaush “implied that blood quantum is

contrary to Anishinaabe values and practices and asserted that using blood quantum would be a form of discrimination. This information empowered the [constitutional] delegates to redefine citizenship in a way that enacted Anishinaabe values and emphasized relationships” (Doerfler 70). This constitution’s genesis nearly 20 years after the publication of *Tracks* shows that these subjects remain a crucial aspect of Native discourse and sovereignty. By forgoing a federal invention, Native peoples can decide who belongs based on their own concepts of reciprocity and kinship structures rather than a system invented by an oppressive force. Different forms of tribal membership can also secure benefits like gaining more political power and representation and maintaining tribal presence for future generations. Ultimately, the decision for tribes to determine who is allowed membership and what requirements are should rest with existing members to ensure sovereignty.

Belonging and community certainly can and often does include blood quantum calculations, but there’s more to being part of a culture than blood alone. As Tuck and Yang state,

Indigenous identity and tribal membership are questions that Indigenous communities alone have the right to struggle over and define, not DNA tests, heritage websites, and certainly not the settler state... Settler nativism is about imagining an Indian past and a settler future; in contrast, tribal sovereignty has provided for an Indigenous present and various Indigenous intellectuals theorize decolonization as Native futures without a settler state. (Tuck and Yang 13)

In *Tracks*, Pauline’s blood quantum may technically categorize her as Anishinaabe to a settler looking at a Dawes roll, but that does not mean she or her community view her as Anishinaabe. Fairness aside, her village sees her as an odd (and even dangerous, due to the destructive nature

of her lies and self-serving behavior) outsider while Pauline sees herself as a superior woman, distinct from her Native counterparts who she deems savage and pagan. If “ties of kinship could also be extended to valued outsiders who had formed voluntary connections with tribal individuals or communities,” they could also be severed by people like Pauline, who prefer to be removed from her original culture (Krugel 57). Indeed, Pauline relishes the moment she perceives herself “as not one speck of Indian but wholly white” (*Tracks* 137). In “The Trickster and World Maintenance: An Anishinaabe Reading of Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*” Lawrence Gross (White Earth Anishinaabe) says, “from an Anishinaabe point of view, however, she is a failure. She is no longer part of the Anishinaabe community; it is clear that her loyalty is to the white establishment” (Gross 58). Readers can decide for themselves if other Anishinaabe could have more charitable perceptions of Pauline— perhaps she is more lost rather than a complete failure— regardless, her values and actions are not compatible with lives among her kin. By the end of the book, she has killed a member of her own tribe and left the reservation for a convent that reinforces her assimilatory and anti-Native convictions.

This supports Doepler’s assessment that “Anishinaabeg controlled these systems and they worked out conflicts or agreed to disagree, as was their sovereign right; they determined who was and who was not a member/citizen of the nation” (Doepler 1). So though some tribes might find usefulness in blood quantum, especially in terms of making sure colonizers do not try to claim indigeneity for their own self-serving purposes, there’s much inter-tribal debate on their value. Canadian author and journalist Jesse Went (Ojibwe) echoes the absurdity of blood relations, which are so often determined through blood quantum, surpassing “watery” ones: “My family felt so embraced by our community, by our extended family, that when it came time to leave it was Serpent River that felt like home. That’s community. Not some fucking card” (Wente

95). Indeed, Wente observes that his home was always full of people who he called family, but were not actually related to him. What's important to him is not who would have occupied the same family tree, but that the people who filled his house also filled it with laughter, wisdom, and love.

**“PEOPLE GET THE GRANDCHILDREN THEY DESERVE: I GOT YOU.” - *TRACKS*
AS AN ADOPTION NARRATIVE**

Unfortunately, Native households have a history of being disrupted due to federal intervention. In 1978 under President Jimmy Carter the federal government passed the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), a critical point in United States legislation of Native American issues. The act was passed after the overdue acknowledgement that Native American children were being removed from their homes— without legitimate cause— and placed in Non-Native households at disproportionate rates, even when Native relatives were available to care for the children. Inherent in this ruling was the recognition that Native Americans were experiencing violations to their sovereignty specific to family and kinship structures due to U.S. regulation, which has not historically (or currently) favored the best interests of Native Americans. This victory took place just prior to Ronald Reagan's election as U.S. president. During the 80s as Erdrich began publishing the *Tracks* tetralogy, there were social and political pressures for Americans to adhere to the mythic golden age of family. Erdrich took a different tactic with her publications that were overtly Native American and centered around Native American values including chosen family. Native Americans had existed for centuries with different family priorities and structures. Ojibwe and Shawnee scholar Rebecca Krugel writes

Native peoples and Anglo-Americans understood this form of deliberately created kinship in very different ways. Americans considered adoptions to be restorative acts, a

means of reintegrating the orphaned or abandoned into their society's most crucial institution, the patriarchal conjugal family. Native peoples understood adoptions as expansive actions, rituals that enlarged tribal kin networks by incorporating new relatives into them... As a Native social construct, adoption also had larger political implications. Through diplomatic rituals sometimes translated into English by the phrase 'The making of relatives' adoption served as a prototype of, and analogy to, the central political acts of negotiating intertribal peace and alliance. (Krugel 57)

Indeed, at the time *Tracks* is set, members of the Ojibwe tribe "spoke from a position of weakness as colonized subjects encapsulated by the United States, but they nonetheless insisted on the legitimacy of their ways of knowing" (Krugel 176). They achieved this via multiracial tribal adoptions, alliance building, elder respect and appreciation, spiritual practices, and hunting rituals (nearly all of which are present in *Tracks*).

Tribe members were empowered to make choices about their families and who they consider a part of their community on their own terms rather than those determined by settler designs. This even included adoptions, where according to Anishinaabe governance someone with a non-Anishinaabe father could be adopted into the committee by a willing clan (Anishinaabe Governance). This is in contrast to the way settler beliefs and legislation separated Native children from their families to assimilate them into white culture. By using adoption to expand the tribe Ojibwe peoples had a better chance of brokering peace among other tribes. Part of why this worked is because it was not unusual for adoptees to remain close contact with their biological family. Rather than the kinship ties being severed, tribal adoption became a network and web of community. Prior to the Indian Child Welfare Act being passed nearly 35% of Native American children were removed from their parents and placed into foster care or adoptive

homes where the guardians were overwhelmingly non-Indian (Adams). However, the inclusionary Anishinaabe strategies lessened the racially constructed inequality that colonizers were imposing on them as well as reinforced the tribe as a collective unit. It served a political purpose as well: “When Dakota and Ojibwe people entered into treaties with one another – long before there was a U.S., and well into the 19th Century – these agreements often involved ‘relation-making’ ceremonies that created family ties among members of separate nations” (Treaties Matter)⁶. Chosen family also arose as an all-encompassing response. It was a reaction to oppressive forces and form of survivance that demonstrated a resistance to settler/colonizer impositions to the concept of family.

According to American Indian citizenship scholar Jill Doerfler (White Earth) the Ojibwe “recognized other Ojibwe by their proximity and the way they lived, including but not limited to their family relations. What they recognized as themselves—what they saw when they saw an Ojibwe—always had the potential to change and incorporate new ideas, and even incorporate new people, but this act of recognition did not rest entirely upon familial relationships” (Doerfler 29). Distinct from American conceptions, “Western and modern vernacular constructs of ‘family’ do not correspond well to Ojibwe historical realities or concepts. The English-language word commonly refers to the nuclear structure of parents and children or may be used synonymously with ‘household’ to signify co-residency. Neither of these meanings translates well into Ojibwa; in fact, there is no word in the Ojibwe language which means ‘family’ in such a restricted sense” (Peers and Brown 3).

⁶ “This website was created as a supplement to Why Treaties Matter - Self Government in the Dakota and Ojibwe Nations, a travelling exhibit on treaties between Dakota and Ojibwe people and the U.S.. The project is a collaboration of the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council, the Minnesota Humanities Center, and the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian” (treatiesmatter.org).

Indeed, characters in *Tracks* who identify strongly with Ojibwe practices use family descriptors as nicknames and terms of endearment (examples include my girl, daughter, uncle, father) for people who are not related in the settler-colonial sense (biologically). For example, Eli is not Nanapush's biological family, but he calls him both son and nephew. Not only are strong kinship bonds translated through familiar names, they exist in action. Lulu is conceived through Fleur's rape by the Argus men, but the connection ends there. For all intents and purposes Eli is her father and treated as such. Margaret steps into the nurturing role as well, delivering Lulu and providing Fleur with postpartum care. Just as Nanapush rescues Fleur from the freezing house, Nanapush rescues Fleur's child from government boarding school, this time with Margaret willingly by his side for help. Their roles in Lulu's life have shifted from grandparent to primary caretaker as they wait out Fleur's return and Lulu's bitterness. Margaret jokes in a loving and sorrowful way, "This child better be the last you father in this tribe" (Erdrich 226). For them, the responsibility of caring for one another is collective. While Nanapush and Margaret continue to care for Lulu with enduring devotion and tenacity and likely always will, they remain open to the possibility that their circumstances would change yet again if forgiveness and tribal sovereignty prevailed.

"WE LOSE OUR CHILDREN IN DIFFERENT WAYS." - HINDRANCES TO NATIVE FAMILY STRUCTURES

Native Americans may have occupied the physical space of the US for the longest amount of time but their ideas and practices are constantly being threatened by settler-colonial forces disrupting or devaluing important cultural tenets in favor of their Euramerican ones. The settler/colonizer family is often influenced by a patriarchal idea of Christianity (which can be feminist, but rarely is). Biblical readings interpreted through a patriarchal lens and the

centuries-long-slew of male leaders in the Church has reinforced the notion that, as feminist theologian Mary Daly aptly puts it, “If God is male, then male is God” in the Christian sphere (Mary Daly). This manifests in practices like purity culture, male-centric wording in religious texts, the lack of female Church doctors (in the Catholic church, doctrinal and theological authorities or contributors), the exclusion of women in ecclesiastical roles, and more. Many of these ideas, historically and currently, worm their way into national rhetoric and governmental practices as well. The behemoth of patriarchy and conservatism is present in the Catholic Church, which has a very long and very shameful relationship with Native Americans and First Nation peoples. Undeniably, the Catholic Church has been the perpetrator time and time again of egregious acts of genocide and colonization from missions to boarding schools to the direct and indirect murder of Native Americans.

With this in mind it’s unsurprising that the Catholic priest in *Tracks* is no exception: not only does he hold religious influence, he also holds governmental power and exerts it on the Native community. Nanapush resists these attempts to push him into this settler/colonizer dynamic. Father Damien is not an overtly antagonistic character; many of his interactions with Nanapush appear to be grounded in a desire to be helpful or his faith (like wanting to baptize Lulu). His desire to be useful on the reservation is evident (fetching a doctor when Lulu is frostbitten, contributing a quarter to save Nanapush’s land) but his good intentions do not erase the patriarchal and colonizing essence of some of his actions, such as his violation of Anishinaabe naming-taboo by demanding Nanapush’s name for the church census. In general, Father Damien prioritizes his Western-minded patriarchal religion over Anishinaabe practice and though Father Damien may seem like he only wants to help, his motivations become clearer as he uses the tools Nanapush taught him to commit colonial violence and further divide the Ojibwe

tribe by encouraging Nanapush to work with the government agents. Nanapush, ever-observant, muses on the prospect: “His ideas were good, no doubt. But I saw the snare right then, the invisible loop hidden in the priest's well-meaning words... I would avoid the job. I knew what was attached... Father Damien looked at me closely, with slow apprehension. He started in again with more reasons, more persuasions. He used everything I'd showed him about talking, did not let me get a word in, let no thought sink into my brain. I had taught him well” (*Tracks* 185). And yet, Father Damien is ironically helpful in his forcefulness to make Nanapush sign his name on Lulu's birth certificate despite Nanapush's distrust of government paperwork. What was bothersome to Nanapush during that moment becomes paramount as it's this very piece of paper that makes it possible for Nanapush to rescue Lulu from boarding school. By the end of the novel it is clear that despite the occasional (and accidental) good Father Damien does, he lacks reverence for Ojibwe resistance.⁷

Survival is chance indeed when forces like disease, religious encroachment, land theft, and sexual violence are rife. In his book *Anishinaabe Ways of Knowing and Being* Gross suggests the existence of something he calls PASS (post-apocalyptic stress syndrome), which “attempts to capture the profound psychological effects an apocalyptic event can have on a population” (Gross 50). Though PASS was created primarily for Native textual analysis Gross applies the theory to actual events such as Europe's Black Death and the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Gross, though PASS is not exclusive to Native Americans it is distinct because the devastation they experience is less likely to inspire rallies for aid— help is intentionally not given in hopes that “the Indian problem” will take care of itself and the population will die off. This intentional inaction from people who could help, but do not, results in Native American suicide,

⁷ It's important to note that Father Damien's character changes across Erdrich's texts. In later novels he becomes a cherished community member who aids in Native resistance and sovereignty.

unemployment, addiction, and other crises. Though PASS exists among characters in *Tracks* it is important to remember that it is not a syndrome exclusive to the pages of the novel– the Anishinaabe, and many other tribes, did experience catastrophic loss from disease that was both convenient and planned (Gross).⁸ Gross argues that Fleur

did not have the strong family and religious leadership available to help channel her powers toward the good. Overwhelmed by her circumstances without a loving, guiding hand, it is little wonder she would lash out, using her powers as best she knew to somehow survive in a world turned upside down. It would take years before she recovered enough to find the good in her heart and use her powers to assist others. The length of time it took Fleur to turn to the good was a tragedy for herself and her community, and is but one example of the deep and abiding negative effects of PASS (Gross 54).

Nanapush's presence in Fleur and Lulu's life does not mean Nanapush is a perfect caretaker (is there such a thing?)-- but he is a faithful one. Not only does Nanapush take on the burden of raising Fleur (to the extent that she lets him), he cares for her child, too. In the third chapter it is revealed that Nanapush has lost his own daughter, nicknamed Lulu, and her death is still too painful for him to speak about. He keeps the memory of his daughter alive by naming his chosen family, specifically Fleur's daughter Lulu, after his blood family, making a tangible connection between the two sets of people he cares for deeply. They never met, but they are now linked. In addition to bolstering his relationship with Lulu via oral communication and stories, he is working to strengthen bonds between mother and daughter as his ultimate goal is to help Lulu understand that her mother did not abandon her out of cruelty, but enrolled her in boarding

⁸ Look at the National Library of Medicine to learn more about colonizers intentionally distributing smallpox blankets to Native communities.

school as a last measure of protection against the colonial violence Fleur was struggling to control. The reader (and Lulu, who is the foremost recipient of this story) discovers Nanapush's purpose for recounting this story in the last chapter of the novel. His stories fill in gaps that Lulu doesn't comprehend at this moment of her life, which is imbued in anger and frustration at her mother's alleged treachery. When we learn about Nanapush's motives the tone of his plea to Lulu is wistful, desperate, and slightly condemning:

I have seen each one of you since then, in your separate lives, never together, never the way it should be. If you wanted to make an old man's last days happy, Lulu, you would convince your mother and father to visit me. I'd bring old times back... I'd work a medicine. But you, heartless one, won't even call Fleur mother... and visit her. Maybe once I tell you the reason she had to send you away, you will start acting like a daughter should. She saved you from worse, as you'll see. (Erdrich 210)

If Lulu were to read or listen to Nanapush's story, the gaps could be filled and Lulu may reunite with her mother. Erdrich herself says, "Every time I write a short story, I am certain that I have come to the end. There is no more. I'm finished. But the stories are rarely finished with me. They gather force and weight and complexity. Set whirling, they exert some centrifugal influence" (ix, "The Red Convertible"). The story may continue and evolve. Closing the book does not mean the story has finished. Ultimately, Lulu spends her life struggling with her mother's choice and oscillates between resenting her and longing for her. In *The Bingo Palace* the reader learns Lulu does not hate Fleur, but understands her. And even if understanding failed, Ojibwe kinship structures allowed women to find relatives in other Native communities (Peers and Brown). Lulu could leave her home but still find family.

“DURING THE YEAR OF SICKNESS, WHEN I WAS THE LAST ONE LEFT, I SAVED MYSELF BY STARTING A STORY.” - STORY’S ROLE IN FAMILY AND SURVIVANCE

Storytelling, which Erdrich and Nanapush both do, is an inextricable part of Native American culture. As Gerald Vizenor says “stories that arise in silence are the sources of a tribal presence” (Vizenor 12). In a world where silence has been impressed upon Native Americans, stories are a way of establishing presence and making themselves known and heard. Stories preserve memory, reflect on events, and instill wisdom. Stories by the very people who directly experience the impacts of myths perpetuated by colonialism can combat them, tell them, and create their own stories that are more reflective of Native peoples realities. Because they are so integral to culture and because of the colonial violences actively working against Native Americans, having stories and people to share them with is a direct form of survivance. By selecting people to share stories with regardless of blood relations, Nanapush is furthering the survival of his tribe. His stories heal, teach, explain, and advise. A crucial component to many of Nanapush’s stories is memory, which carries on the legacies of people and moments. When a person is told a story, they have the power to do something with it, whether it’s to make a choice inspired by it or share it with someone else. In this way, stories are more than entertainment—they can be powerful connective threads that help people relate to, warn, and counsel one another. Vizenor’s assessment of a chief in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Journals* in 1837 rings true in *Tracks*: “In that generation the tribes had been decimated by diseases; the cruelties of civilization had dispossessed the tribes of their land, but not their stories. The shadows of their words, the hermeneutics of survivance, are forever true on the land stolen from the tribes”

(Vizenor 163). The passing of time between 1837 and Nanapush's own story in 1912 reinforces the story's role in survivance.

Every chapter of *Tracks* contains a question of how the characters can continue to live in the loss, grief, violence, inner-turmoil, pressure, and heartbreak they face-- but they do. Not only do they live, they (most characters anyway) grow closer through love, humor, kinship, and stories. When telling these stories Nanapush acutely feels "the customary hesitancy for the Anishinaabeg to utter their own names" out of humility, the belief that names are connected to spirits, and the reverence with which they are given (Flavin 1). However, he does so for Lulu so that she may understand her family story. In this breaking of cultural taboo the double importance of power that names and storytelling have is revealed as Nanapush reinforces the notion that stories possess a medicinal quality. If Lulu were to ever hear Nanapush's narration, perhaps she could forgive her mother for the extreme measures she took to protect her.

Part of the power of Indigenous literature lies in its ability to articulate the persistent strength and creativity in Native Americans even as colonization works against them. In Simon Ortiz' seminal essay "Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism", Ortiz argues that Native Americans have been ingenious and creative when it comes to finding methods to adapt to mainstream cultures while still preserving their own. He argues that this kind of response, often assumed to be assimilatory, is actually Native Americans negotiating life "on their own terms" (Ortiz 10). Despite the fact that the literary and oral traditions have changed over the centuries, it still maintains pertinent themes such as identity, spirituality, sovereignty, and discrimination. "Story is to engender life," and this is evident in Nanapush's numerous experiences telling stories (Ortiz 11). Without these stories, "there would likely be no basis for present-day Indian writing, much less Indian people. But because of the

insistence to keep telling and creating stories, Indian life continues, and it is this resistance against loss that has made life possible” (Ortiz 11). The characters and their actions represent these qualities of creativity and resistance constantly in *Tracks*. I see this fortitude in Nanapush, who is one of the last living tribal elders still committed to maintaining a traditional way of life. I see it in the stories Nanapush and Pauline share about Fleur, who has the strength to survive after traumas like her rape, her husband’s affair, and her infant’s death. In these stories the reader sees how Ortiz’s pertinent themes show the simultaneously challenging and admirable aspects of Fleur’s character.

Part of her strength is derived from the community who, though wary of her, grow in acceptance of her. This community bonding expands when Fleur and Eli become a couple and Margaret spends more and more time at Fleur’s house preparing meals and caring for her grandchild, even giving up her own dinner so Lulu has more to eat when food is scarce. This is taken even farther when Nanapush and Margaret become a couple, which does not seem likely without Fleur and Eli’s relationship to reunite them. So strength is present in Fleur’s survival and her assurance of the continuation of the community on the reservation. Fleur is indeed a formidable character due to her comfort level with vengeance and sorcery, but most of her violent acts are reserved for people who are pose a threat to her safety or the wellbeing of the reservation, as seen in the comeuppance of the poker players who rape her and the drownings or crushings of intruding lumbermen on Native land. Indeed, themes of strength and community-care are at their peak at the end of the novel when Fleur uses all of the carpenter-ingenuity and sorcery she can muster (at her own expense) to intimidate the loggers and complicit Kapshaws who are stealing her land. Erdrich describes this scene powerfully as the lumber crews, unaware of the power Fleur possesses and the fate they are about to meet, “[bite

their lips, glance over their shoulders at Fleur, who bares her teeth in a wide smile that frightened even those who did not understand the smiles of Pillagers” (*Tracks* 223).

“WE MUST LIVE CLOSE TOGETHER, AS ONE PEOPLE...” - MOVING FORWARD

For Native Americans living amidst colonial rulings and practices it is of the utmost importance “to encourage and remind each other that we are so much more together than separate; to encourage and remind each other to give up the bad practices that deplete our body, mind, and spirit; and to be dedicated to helping our fellow man” (Fiddler). Though certain traumas that are related to and impact family life may overlap between settler-Americans and Native Americans, there are a host of differences in the cultural values and histories of the two groups at play here. Americans comprise a more individualistic culture that rewards the prioritization of self over that of a collective group. Additionally, White Americans are a highly privileged population due to colonial powers such as chattel slavery that reveals its power, irreparability, and consequences hundreds of years later. These structural and physical violences enabled upward mobility at the expense of (and on the backs of) minority populations including Native Americans. A staggering number of Native women have experienced sexual and domestic violence.⁹ Native Americans are disproportionately likely to be victims of violent crime (Missing and Murdered Indigenous People Crisis). Native Americans are among the poorest people of our nation. These statistics are based on data that’s actually been gathered, the lack of which is a crisis itself demonstrating the lack of prioritization and urgency that these numbers necessitate. For Native Americans who have family histories entrenched in addiction, abuse and structural violence as a result of oppression, they will not be completely deprived of networks woven of love and support.

⁹ For more on this ongoing crisis, read *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* by Andrea Smith.

Chosen family presents more options. It is also its own form of sovereignty because it does not subscribe to the notion of legitimacy based on the Euramerican standard which is so often antithetical to and critical of Native American ways of being. Native American epistemologies often have their validity questioned as they do not fall into dominant European customs, but many still choose to reject these American standards in favor of what is best for their way of communal living. Since the 18th century, the Anishinabeg have “undermined one of the new racial hierarchy's central organizing tenets, the impermeability of racial categories and the consequent inability of kinship to cross racial lines” and baffled Anglo-Americans with “their refusal to accept racial difference as the most important indicator of an individual's social power or social dispossession” (Kugel 76). And the practice of choosing family has endured. The Anishinaabe Abinoojii Family Services states:

For hundreds of years our people took care of one another; they lived their lives according to ancient traditions, customs and values that were passed along from one generation to the next. Families helped and supported one another and worked together to protect our most revered members: our children and our Elders. When families had difficulties or when children required care beyond what their natural parents could provide, extended family or community members stood in as alternative caregivers (“Anishinaabe Abinoojii Family Services”).

Erdrich writes a novel of verisimilitude that does not stray from the hardships of coloniality imbued in Native American life. Reading *Tracks* as a non-Native, I am reminded of my own struggles and very different experiences with family. Fleur, for all her idiosyncrasies, threats, heartbreaks and failures, is still included as a member of Nanapush’s family. Fleur is an orphan that becomes a daughter once again, then Fleur’s own daughter becomes Nanapush’s

daughter when Fleur disappears. For many Westerners, family is the most salient aspect of everyday life. I, a participant of the settler/colonizer family structure, have been confronted many times with rhetoric that reinforces the idea that forgiving family is more important than the transgressions committed against the victim— even as Americans become increasingly flexible with whom they consider family. The myth persists, and it aches. The choice to pledge allegiance to unstable and hurtful relatives is oftentimes commended because Westerners see in that a commitment to family. But with chosen family it is not necessary to cling to abusers or stay in a dysfunctional household because that is the only option. I would argue that being more flexible with our definitions of family increases survival and survivance because it enables us to remove ourselves from people who are bad for our mental and physical well-being. Every relationship causes some level of strain. Having the choice to step away from blood family and knowing there is still an unconditional support system is a hopeful prospect indeed.

Family provides, supports, counsels, encourages, protects, shoulders emotional burdens, and much more. Nanapush advises Lulu who (not) to marry, shares stories of his sexual escapades with Eli, pleads with Lulu to see Fleur's perspective, heals people with his medicinal words, and uses his social standing and influence to preserve his tribe. Fleur too exhibits the kind of loyalty seen in the man who raised her: she shaves her head in solidarity with Margaret when Margaret's braids are forcefully cut, but when Margaret slights Fleur she forgoes seeking revenge out of allegiance to Nanapush. Nanapush unites a village previously divided by genocidal attempts and disagreements across the Kashpaw, Morrissey, Pillager, and Puyat lineages. Despite its numerous powerful albeit flawed individuals, parts of the village and community remain disturbed— Pauline leaves to join the convent and rejects her Nativeness the Morrissey brothers also lean in favor of assimilatory measures on the reservation— and by the end of the novel

Erdrich has not provided the reader with a family more unified than it was at the start of the novel. That does not mean chosen family is an unsuccessful practice at all. Lulu chooses to leave her family after Nanapush does everything in his power to bring her back to him and Margaret (hence Nanapush's narration), but Nanapush's story assures listeners that while Lulu's return might not be imminent, it would be welcome. Anishinabeg and other Native tribes have benefitted from this practice for centuries and will likely continue to do so, even with the constraints imposed by colonization. The characters of *Tracks* make it clear "that they are survivors. Despite all the attempts by the government and mainstream society to undermine Anishinaabe culture and, essentially, conduct genocide against the Indians, the Anishinaabe survive" (Gross 48-49). Perhaps, too, they survive because Native Americans cling to community, and chosen family is made up of community. This truth about the book's characters and their inclination for kin-making and fellowship pervades outside the pages of the book and into the actual lives of the Anishinaabe and many other Native tribes.

Because family is so immediate to us, it has enormous capability to be the source of struggle in our lives— and when family fails, the consequences can be cataclysmic, from biochemical changes in the body to the exacerbation of dormant mental disorders to triggers for heart and brain disease. Trauma can manifest in sleep disorders, difficulty regulating emotions, and illnesses like PTSD and depression. Pairing this with the generational trauma many Native Americans have to face makes the sanctity of chosen family more essential than ever. In an interview, sociologist and scholar of Native identity Kathleen Fitzgerald (Irish-American) gives an Indigenous interviewee (name and tribe withheld) says this:

[‘The family unit is just, you know, kinda all mixed up... People just take care of each other and that's the most important thing. And sometimes you'll have uncles and aunties

that aren't blood, you know? But they are just as important and they are just as strong a part of the family as the other person would be... We had family friends that I always knew as uncles and aunts... The only thing that kinda came off as shocking is the whole thing of people kind of giving their kids to like their sisters or brothers or whatever. Not giving as if they're possessions but having somebody else raise their children. In this society, in American society, mainstream society, that would be seen as bad parenting. But actually it's very good parenting to know what your limits are and to say, 'You know what? I need some help. And can you please take care of my three children for a while?'] (Fitzgerald 144).

Indeed, the Ojibwe in *Tracks* have a very action-oriented approach to family. First Nations and Indigenous studies scholar Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee Nation) writes, "We exist today as indigenous nations, as peoples, and the foundation of any continuity as such is our relationships to one another--in other words, our kinship with other humans and the rest of creation. Such kinship isn't a static thing; it's dynamic, ever in motion. It requires attentiveness; kinship is best thought of as a verb rather than a noun, because kinship, in most indigenous contexts, is something that's done more than something that simply is" (Acoose 150). These kinship structures are examples of self-determination. It reveals a Native-centered approach to existing, surviving, and lasting.

"YOU WERE THE LAST TO EMERGE." - CONCLUSION

In the beginning of this paper there was a German phrase, "*Ouch hoer ich sagen, das sippe blût von wazzere niht verdirbet.*" Blood runs thicker than water. This consanguine phrase has flowed through many American minds, and it was one echoed in the rhetoric of Reagan's family values. As he was lauding the nuclear family and its role in "civilized life", Erdrich wrote

about family in a different way: one that includes messiness, mistakes, fighting, choosing, forgiving, resenting, loving and surviving. I want to close this paper with an Anishinaabe saying: “*Naad-i-maad’taa*.” Let’s help each other. Kinship in *Tracks* strengthens, enriches, and teaches. As Stephanie Coontz writes, during a reflection on close communities, “failure to understand that these family forms are as meaningful to the people who live in them as our own families are to us leads to tragic misunderstandings” (Coontz 280). Just because two people share genes doesn’t mean they’re going to treat each other well– but there are people out there who will. Nanapush chooses Fleur, Margaret, Eli, and Lulu to take care of, and they care for him in return. “Kinship in all its messy complexity and diversity gives us the best measure of interpretive possibility, as it speaks to the fact that our literatures, like our various peoples, are alive” (Justice 166). Reading *Tracks* alongside Anishinaabe familial epistemologies and research affirms that the chosen family trope engenders freedom and community, which is invaluable for exercising sovereignty and survivance. And it is a reminder that, as Nanapush suggests, stories are medicinal and life-giving.

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