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Patrick B. Benton  
Colby College

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**The Agent of Change: Trickster in Ojibwa Oral Narratives  
and in the Works of Louise Erdrich**

**Written by Patrick Benton '07**

**Prepared as an Honors Thesis Mentored by Professor Patricia Onion**

**February 1, 2007**

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Colleges rarely erect monuments to their faculty, unlike the many bricks named for donors and administrators; this is my monument to you with my many profound thanks!

## INTRODUCTION

Change is not only *a* theme of Louise Erdrich's work, but the paramount theme. Critic John Purdy concurs, writing that "the characters who people her pages are immensely recognizable to an audience comprised of many cultures: they exhibit all the frailties and strengths, the failures and triumphs one would expect for humans who face what we all – as individuals, as cultures, and as species – must face: change" (Purdy, 8). What is this change, though? And, who is the agent of this change?

Casual readers of Louise Erdrich's works may not be aware that her characters are informed by a rich body of oral narratives concerning the Trickster: a wanderer who, motivated by food, shelter, sex, or amusement tricks animals and humans. Trickster is an important cultural hero, pan-tribally, who not only tricks, but transgresses, transforms, shape-changes, heals, and works magic. He exists liminally between the supernatural and the natural. He is ego-less and his actions transcend normative constructs of time and space. If modern man might say, *Cogito ergo sum*, Trickster would say *Facio ergo sum* – I do therefore I am. Most importantly, he initiates change, whether seen, symbolically, through his travels and shape-changing, or, literally, through great acts of destruction motivated by self-pity, greed, or revenge. However, through destruction, Trickster also initiates creation.

Erdrich uses Trickster in her novels to overturn normative values of the novel: Erdrich prizes multivocal narration with polynomial characters. Trickster's shape-changes are paralleled in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* by "Father Damien," who is neither a priest nor a man but rather a young woman who has also been

called Agnes DeWitt and Sister Cecilia: evidencing that as people change their identities do too and this change warrants an explicit marker of that change. The shape-changes are paralleled in *Four Souls* by Fleur's ability to save herself by casting out a soul that takes her fatal place. Readers have access to Fleur, like Badger's Wenebojo, only by reported speech: challenging the notion that a modern novel ought to make the reader privy to all of the hero's deeds and thoughts, with accompanying narration to help us evaluate those thoughts and actions. The range of behaviors and morality in Erdrich's tricksters deconstructs our usual notion of the binary: that something must be one thing or another. This deconstruction is achieved by presenting characters who commit heroic acts and yet reminding the reader that these "heroes" are committing these acts by deception. John Jacob Mauser, the nefarious Trickster figure of many of Erdrich's works, returns in *Four Souls* as a pitiable character challenging the convention of many Western-themed works: a hero acting against a villain with both characters very-definitely presented as one or the other. Mauser's deception and theft is achieved by his superior knowledge of the paper world of land transfer – his downfall ultimately questions whether the rational, the written, or the permanent is, in fact, superior to family and blood ties, local knowledge, or intuition.

## I. TRICKSTER IN OJIBWA ORAL NARRATIVES

### Trickster's Travels

The most revealing moments of conflict in the Ojibwa Wenebojo cycle center around Wenebojo's unrelenting desire to travel. Wenebojo's travels have little

psychological motivation: Wenebojo is always moving and the narrative conflicts arise when Wenebojo is inhibited in these travels. Badger recounts that Wenebojo and one of his brothers travel constantly while the third brother, the stone, always stays at camp. The traveling twins travel so far that they “knew all the country around about, but they couldn’t go any further” (15). The brothers traveled all throughout the day, but returned each night to camp for the sake of the stone-brother who never left. Wenebojo desires to travel for longer periods of time and conspires with his brother to kill their stone-brother so they will not have to stay in one place any more (16). The stone has heard the conspiracy, however, and when Wenebojo returns to camp, he sacrifices himself. The stone brother even helps Wenebojo kill him by suggesting that Wenebojo heat the stone and, when it is hot, spill cold water on the stone so that it fractures. Badger makes note that it “was the first time that anybody ever died on the earth” (16). This first murder allows Wenebojo and his brother to travel “here and there.... They traveled all the time” (16). At the end of the episode in the cycle, Badger says:

After that, Wenebojo and his other brother left that place. They traveled here and there, far and near. Whenever night came, they lay down and went to sleep. They had no special place to come back to now. They traveled all the time (17).

We can see how travel is problematic: while Wenebojo had succeeded in his desire to travel uninhibited, coming back at night gave him a “special place” to which he could return. Later, we will see how the tension between travel and an anchored position factors into Trickster psychology in Erdrich’s works, but, for now, we turn to the death of Wenebojo’s second brother, which is again precipitated by Wenebojo’s desire to travel unfettered.

Wenebojo's remaining brother grew tired and began to lag behind:

He stayed behind sometimes. He walked slowly, because he was tired and always lagging behind Wenebojo. Wenebojo always waited for his brother to catch up with him. One time Wenebojo wondered how long it would take his brother to catch up (17).

In this passage, we can see that Wenebojo is not necessarily uncaring for his brother: like returning to camp at night, Wenebojo waits for his brother and returns to him when he travels alone. Like the earlier passage, though, Wenebojo lusts for unfettered and longer travels. So, he digs a hole for his brother so that he will remain safe and promises to return in four days. "He traveled and traveled and traveled," recounts Badger,

He went just as fast as he could because there was no one to hold him back now. He was all by himself. Wenebojo was happy, because he could see how the earth looked. He looked all about him. He kept traveling all the time (17).

Wenebojo forgets to return after four days, however, "because he was too busy looking around the earth, and traveling here and there. Long after the four days were over, he happened to remember his brother whom he had left behind" (17). When he returns, his brother is gone: "When Wenebojo got there, he couldn't find his brother any more. He saw his brother's tracks, so he knew that his brother had left" (17). Like the death of the stone-brother, this death is a sacrifice – tiring of waiting and knowing that Wenebojo desires to travel unfettered, Wenebojo's brother leaves of his own volition. As a comfort to Wenebojo, his brother tells him that he will "make a road for the [dead] people to travel along when the thing (death) happens to them" (17).

While Wenebojo may be the protagonist of this cycle, the death that results from his wanderlust creates the opportunity for another travel: that of his brother in creating

the spirit world. We can interpret a palliative nod in this second death: while it was caused by Wenebojo's desire to wander, it is the nexus for an important spiritual travel in which everyone will eventually take part. It is important to note that it is only after he has created the spirit road that we are given a name for Wenebojo's brother:

Nekajiwegizik, "someone who goes down behind the sky, behind the sunset" (19). Not only is an important spiritual facet to Ojibwa life created by this journey, but it becomes the defining travel for Wenebojo's brother because only then does he have a name, a definition. Then, of course, the coda: "Now that Wenebojo was all alone, he traveled wherever he wanted to go" (19).

In another section of the cycle, travel features in the creation of the present world. Wenebojo kills two underwater spirit kings for killing a wolf with whom he had been traveling. In response to the kings' murders, the water rises up and deluges the earth. Wenebojo escapes to the top of the highest tree he can find. The water is so high that Wenebojo's head is nearly covered. Wenebojo sees an otter in the water and sends him to the bottom to try to recover some dirt, but the otter fails. Wenebojo then sends a beaver, who also returns to the surface without any earth. Finally, he sends a muskrat who is successful in recovering five grains which Wenebojo dries and throws on the surface, creating an island (39). Wenebojo spreads more dirt making the island larger. Wenebojo then enlists the help of the adik, or caribou, to run to the edge of the earth and see how big it is, but the adik returns saying it is not large enough. Again, Wenebojo journeys and throws more earth around making it larger:

He threw it here, there, and everywhere, near and far, as far as he could throw it. When he'd thrown enough around, he called the adik to see how



big the earth was. He set him out and waited for him. But that animal never came back (40).

When he grew tired of waiting for the adik to return, Wenebojo again travels. Again, we can see that this is a perennial type of travel: a travel without end, without reference to time, and without direction: “Wenebojo traveled here and there in every direction, and traveled and traveled and traveled. He didn’t know which way he was going. He was just traveling” (40). Travel, simply, is a mode of being for Wenebojo.

Wenebojo’s travels are important to three distinct events: the first two murders, the creation of the spirit journey, and the creation of the world today. Wenebojo’s travel spurs other travels for both supernatural beings and for humans: Wenebojo’s second brother pioneers the spirit journey that humans will travel on in death and his creation of the earth makes possible the wanderlust of humans. There is an apparent tension in this solitary conclusion, however. After the death of Wenebojo’s stone brother, despite Wenebojo’s happiness with the freedom the death brings, Badger notes that now “they had no special place to come back to now” (17). The pain of the second brother’s death is due, in part, to Wenebojo’s inability to find the stone marker of his brother’s hole. While travel has its own end for Wenebojo, it does carry with it the problems of home. Further, it is the loneliness Wenebojo encounters after he creates the earth that causes the spirits to create Wenebojo’s parents, the first Indians. Traveling is its own benefit to Wenebojo; however, travel also opens an important space in the narrative for creation and destruction.

### Trickster's Being

Trickster exists neither as a purely supernatural or a purely natural character; as a liminal character he exists on the threshold between the two spheres. Some scholars would group Trickster tales – and their modern corollaries – in the literary genre of “magical realism.” This classification is problematic, however, because magic presumes either some trick-of-the-hand exploitation by the teller or the interruption of the natural, rational, or “here-and-now” existence by the supernatural, godly, or irrational sphere. These definitions are made possible by concepts of time and existence that simply do not exist in the myth cycle and when these ‘transgressions’ occur in literature they go unremarked by the work as supernatural or other-worldly because the psychology of the literature is such that both spheres are allowed to exist together. Trickster is a literary figure who exists in much the same way: in his narrative he defies time, mortality, ‘possible’ human behavior, and form and, at the same time, acts so human-like. Similarly, Badger ends his telling of the Trickster cycle by noting that

Wenebojo is still alive and can hear what we’re saying right now. He’s probably laughing when he thinks about how he lived when he was young and about all the foolish things he did. But Wenebojo can’t read our thoughts. Only God can do that (45).

Once again, Wenebojo appears to exist in a supernatural, timeless realm, but does not adhere to our notions of what it means to be supernatural versus what it means to be natural: he is ‘timeless’ but does not hold all of the powers we attribute to our ‘gods’.

Characters in the oral narrative do not have a certain corporeal identity; rather, the narrative stresses that Trickster seems to be something or looks like something – animal or human. Badger tells us that Wenebojo and his brothers are conceived by a liaison

between a gust of wind and a girl who lives in “a different world” (19) alone with her mother where grass and bushes are the only flora. If we encountered a western myth, we might expect that this gust of wind is some earthly incarnation of a god – Zeus in the form of the gust – or that the sexual liaison would otherwise conform to the methods of human pregnancy. In such, there is never the imagery of the gust of wind necessarily penetrating and impregnating the girl – it rushes past as a gust of wind normally would and that is the end of the matter. When the old lady suspects her daughter’s pregnancy, the girl reveals how the gust of wind rushed past: “Then the old lady knew right away who had done it. It was the Sun” (14). Again, this is equally problematic, but, whether a gust of wind or the sun or the sun as a gust of wind, Trickster’s patrimony is an unremarked given and Trickster’s ‘father’ remains part of the natural scene without any human-like incarnation. When the girl gives birth, we are told that the first baby, Wenebojo, “looked just like a human baby boy” (14); that his second brother “didn’t have human features exactly, but he looked like a human baby to some extent”; and that the third brother “didn’t look like a human child. This one was stone” (15). The operative word might be “looked” in that Trickster is a shape-shifter. Trickster may look like a human or a wolf – which he does in the cycle – but Trickster remains Trickster no matter which guise he is in; when he is human, he only looks human. Trickster may be properly said to be purely an energy, definable as Trickster, but capable of being poured into whichever vessel he so chooses to pour himself into, and, although he looked like a boy when born, he is not a boy. Frequently, we will see that Trickster energy in a woman’s form. Indeed, too, we will see episodes where Trickster dies and resurrects. Trickster’s shape-shifting identified, we now turn to some of these episodes in the cycle.

These episodes not only exemplify the shape-shifting ability, but also enlighten Trickster's foibles and strengths. Trickster's transitory form is another example of continual motion for his shifting body is an analogue to his constant traveling.

### **Trickster's Tricks**

Obviously, we should expect some deviousness from a character called Trickster. More often than not, Trickster's tricks are motivated by fairly organic desires: food, shelter, and sex are the top motivators. How trickster tricks, however, is an important endeavor of study, especially as it applies to modern literary Tricksters.

Trickster tricks as a method of survival. While he prefers to be on the outside of a group, being part of a community confers the benefits of food, shelter, and companionship. The first shape-shifting we encounter is when Wenebojo assumes the form of a beaver. This passage indicates where Trickster's desire for something turns out to harm him. Wenebojo, in his travels, encounters some beavers building a dam in the river. He asks the beavers to make him like them and that, "If you can make me look like you, I want a big wide tail, bigger than I am" (21). The beavers tell him that they cannot make him look like them, even after all of his begging, and when they tire of his pestering they suggest he throw himself into the water. He does and when he comes out of the water he looks like a beaver and had the biggest tail of all the beavers. It is appropriate to pause here and suggest that Trickster's transformation comes about by simply doing what it is that defines what he wants to be – a form of stupid is what stupid does in the sense that when Trickster acts like a beaver, he is a beaver. To continue, Wenebojo helps the beavers build a dam and gather food for the winter. Some Indians

encounter the beaver dam in the winter and begin to hack it apart to catch some of the beavers, but:

In all the excitement, Wenebojo forgot to go out through his own big door. He tried to get through all the other doors, but they were all too small. He just had to stay there. The people outside were working all the time to break open the beaver house. After they'd broken it down, they saw that big beaver tail sticking out. One of the Indians said, 'Here's one!' They dragged Wenebojo out of there and put him on top of the ice. They killed him there. ... But where that blood fell, Wenebojo rose up again. He came out of that pool of blood (21-2).

Because Wenebojo is resurrected from the blood of the beaver, we could think that he was born a beaver, in a way, just as being born of a human girl seemed to make him human. However, Wenebojo is resurrected as Wenebojo, not as a beaver and not as a human. The next passage of the cycle begins, "So Wenebojo went along the edge of the frozen river once more" (22) – without remark on what Wenebojo's shape or form now is. The implications, again, is that shape-shifting is a type of identity-wandering akin to Trickster's physical travels.

In some instances, Trickster's tricks are predicated on the ignorance of whom he is tricking. In the story of Wenebojo and the Beavers, he introduces himself to the beavers as such:

Brothers, so this is where you are! I've been looking all over for you! I heard that you were somewhere else. ... When I last saw you, you were little babies. You wouldn't remember me. That was a long time ago (21).

In this instance, like many, Wenebojo begins by invoking a familial relationship. He also appeals to the beavers by suggesting that he is not foreign, as such, but just that they would not remember him from the last time they, supposedly, last saw him. Finally, he

predicates the trick by saying the last time they *had* seen him was when they were too young to remember. In this passage, Wenebojo appears to be tricking the beavers purely to look like them (see above). Certainly, however, Wenebojo does gain some benefit of food and shelter by living with the beavers even if he does assist them in building the dam. This trick, then, may be more of a temporary survival trick than some nefarious trick whereby Trickster gains at some other's peril.

When Wenebojo encounters the fox, he begins with the same introduction: he hails him as 'brother'; notes that the fox last saw him when he was a baby and that the fox would not remember him anyway. Wenebojo hears the sound of a little bell tinkling, a noise the fox is making, and desires to make the same noise. The fox informs him that he cannot make Wenebojo like him and when Wenebojo insists, the fox relents. Frequently, Trickster's tricks come back at him and this is one such instance. The fox tells him to find a small stone which the fox ties to Wenebojo's rectum. When Wenebojo moved, it sounded like the bells ringing and he parts ways with the fox. Wenebojo runs off and when the bells begin to sound like they were far off in the distance, he stops to find that his intestines have been stretched out. When he tries to grab his intestine, it breaks off and Wenebojo pulls the intestines toward him and hangs them in the nearby elm trees as food for his aunts. Oddly, Wenebojo runs on and the bells continue. He stops and repeats the process, throwing his intestines over the trees as food. Wenebojo is not bodily injured by this act – another nod to his 'other' status of being. What moral we might take from this passage is not particularly clear: we might say that one should be careful of what one wishes for, certainly, the fox has tricked Wenebojo to some extent for Wenebojo cannot make the sound as the fox does. However, Wenebojo does take the

trick in stride, making benefit for others out of the trick that has been perpetrated against him. Food is one of Trickster's most important motives and we can see in this passage how tricks are benign when the result is a benefit for the community. Rather than be upset by how the trick has ended, Wenebojo does a creative act by providing his intestines as food.

As we have seen, Trickster's tricks frequently backfire in that either he does not get what he wants or he is tricked, in turn, by those he tries to trick. When Wenebojo encounters a moose, he hails the moose in the fashion he hailed the beavers and the fox. Wenebojo asks, "Brother, did you hear about those people, about the two brothers who killed one another?" (24). Wenebojo is, of course, referring back to the episode where he has killed his brothers. The moose has not heard of the incident and so Wenebojo tells the moose to stand sideways to demonstrate how the person looked when he was killed. The moose does so and Wenebojo kills the moose. There is a great deal of humor in Trickster stories and this episode is particularly droll: when the moose says "What are you doing, Wenebush? You're killing me," Wenebojo replies, "Well, I told you two brothers were going to kill one another" (24). This trick ends badly for Wenebojo, though, when he tries to eat the meat. A tree falls between the limbs of another tree and when Wenebojo tries to pull it free, he gets caught. Then, a band of timber wolves comes by. Wenebojo tries to distract them from the meat by sending them another direction, but, seeing that Wenebojo was stuck and suspecting a trick, the timber wolves find the meat and eat it all.

Trickster frequently punishes himself in trying to execute a trick. Seeing a lake full of ducks and geese, he tempts the birds into a wigwam he has built on the pretense

that he is building a dancing place where they can all dance. He tells them to close their eyes, which the ducks and geese do, under the threat that their eyes will turn red if they open them. As the birds are making noise and singing, Wenebojo goes around wringing their necks. The hell-diver and the loon suspect a trick, open their eyes, and alert the other birds to the peril. The birds begin to peck at Wenebojo, who is blockaded in by the hell-diver and the loon who had waited near the door. Many of the birds escape, but Wenebojo collects the birds he has killed and settles in for his feast (26-8). Again, however, he is tricked by another before he can capitalize on his feat and the second part of the story incorporates the often earthy humor of Trickster tales. Wenebojo tires before he can eat his prey and the South Wind men come into his camp. Wenebojo is warned of their approach by his rear end, which farted as the South Wind men approached. The South Wind men find some red dye to plug his behind so it cannot warn Wenebojo again. The South Wind men eat and then depart. Wenebojo, finding the dye, pulls it out and then, to punish his rectum, shoves it back in as far as he can as punishment for not warning him. He then further attempts to punish his rear by burning it in a fire, mistaking the sound of burning as a call for help (28-9). In these passages, we can see not only the earthy humor of Trickster tales, but also how Wenebojo's body defies the conventional failings of a human form – his rear end exists as something separate from his body, somehow, as something he can punish as a part without it affecting the whole. That he is so unaffected by his bodily failings – that he punishes his himself, essentially, in trying to punish one part of his whole – demonstrates further that his liminal state means that while his tricks are supposed to ensure his organic survival, the result of those tricks need not



result in benefit to Wenebojo. Rather, the success of a trick, from our perspective, is how well it benefits a community or what acts of creation the trick inspires.

### **Trickster Morality**

It is unclear, precisely, why Wenebojo encounters the beavers. Wenebojo desires food and shelter – desires to ensure his survival – but, as we have seen, shape-shifting is another form of travel and, therefore, he could have been motivated purely by the desire to change shape. What is especially noteworthy, though, is that, while in the company of the beavers, Wenebojo plays his part building the dam and helping store food for the winter. In the passages where Wenebojo kills his brothers, I noted that it ended with the concern that, now, Wenebojo “had no special place to come back to now” (17).

Wenebojo lacks interiority in the oral narrative and, therefore, does not posit his own opinion of that “special place” and what it might mean to him. We have seen how Wenebojo desires to travel – unfettered at that – and most of the Trickster stories do not figure with Wenebojo as part of a group. Trickster is about change; whether Trickster is part of a community or wandering as lone individual, he is a whirlwind that enters lives. For the most part, he remains on the margins of any group – something other or transgressive in defined social milieus. It is difficult, otherwise, to imprint a morality – a good and bad we might recognize – when deviousness and deceitfulness is not beneath Trickster.

When Trickster is part of a community, he can exhibit benign qualities. In the passage of the narrative where Wenebojo lives with a pack of wolves, we can see how Trickster can be destructive when he indulges his selfishness, self-pity, greed, or desire

for revenge. Wenebojo encounters the wolves in the usual manner: calling to them as brothers, assuring them that he knew them as babies, and that they would not remember him (31). After talking for a while, the wolves tell Wenebojo that they must go, despite his entreaties for them to stay. “You can’t keep up with us, because we travel very fast,” said the oldest wolf, reminiscent of Wenebojo’s murders of brothers who, too, could not or would not travel at his speed. Wenebojo suggests to the oldest wolf that they let the others go ahead, and, feeling sorry for Wenebojo, the oldest wolf agrees. Further, Badger says that the old wolf “didn’t want to leave him behind, since he was so anxious to come along with them” (31). So, because Wenebojo so desired to be part of the group he was included, even though we have seen how in other episodes Wenebojo has abandoned those who fettered his travel.

After a time, Wenebojo quarrels with the group. The wolves are making grease from tallow and the oldest wolf has instructed Wenebojo not to watch the process because “if anybody watches or peeks at the wolf while he’s making grease and tallow, the bone will slip out of his hands and come and hit that person on the eye” (32-3). The oldest wolf makes this instruction to Wenebojo in particular, although all the wolves are not to look, because he acknowledges that Wenebojo is a “great one for not obeying orders and for not listening to what you’re told” (32). There is a hole in Wenebojo’s blanket, however, and he watches the process. As predicted, the bone slips from the wolf and hits Wenebojo in the eye. Although he takes part in the community, he again transgresses the rules. The oldest wolf fears that Wenebojo might do something to the wolves because, rather than admitting to his transgression, Wenebojo claims the wolf hit him with the bone on purpose. Wenebojo then claims he, too, can make grease, insists

that the others cover their faces, and exacts revenge against the wolf whose bone hit him in the eye. The oldest wolf decides to leave with the pack, but, rather than leave him on his own, leaves the wolf who liked Wenebojo best for which “Wenebojo was glad” (34).

One day, while the wolf is out hunting, he chases a deer that has jumped across the river. The wolf drowns, however. Wenebojo follows the tracks after the wolf fails to return and discovers what has happened. Wenebojo blames the death on the underwater *manidog*, or spirits, and seeks revenge. When he enters the underwater community, though, the wolf’s skin is hanging on the doorway of the king’s house (37), so we can suspect some culpability on the part of the kings. One day, the *manidog* were resting on the riverbank and Wenebojo wounds their two kings. The whole party rushes back into the water including the two wounded kings (34-5). Later, he encounters an old woman who is treating the kings. He discovers how she treats the kings, then kills her and assumes her skin in order to infiltrate the underwater community where he successfully kills the kings (36-7). This triggers the deluge discussed on page seven.

What, then, does this say about Trickster morality? First, it says that Wenebojo is a character one cannot pin down and that, for all of his desires to travel, he does desire, at times, to be part of a community. When he acts selflessly, he can be an honorable member of the community: he takes part fully in the building of the dam and is tolerated by the wolves. Trickster can be wholly loyal, as well, as when he seeks revenge for the killing of the wolf. At the same time, his tricks often are unsuccessful and he frequently is unable to truly reap the rewards he hopes to bring to himself. Destruction also follows Trickster: his revenge enacts the deluge and his desire to travel unfettered is the cause of

two deaths. Frequently, it is those who spectate Trickster's deeds who pay the penalty, willingly or not. However, out of the deluge Wenebojo recreates the world.

We cannot say that Trickster is good or bad, or that his tricks are benign or malignant. Instead, we can see that Trickster can be both creative and destructive and that destruction is a necessary part of creation. Toward the end of the narrative cycle, Wenebojo becomes depressed and threatens the *manidog* who have hurt him. He speaks to the earth and says, "Whoever is underneath the earth down there, I will pull them out and bring them up on top here. I can play with them and do whatever I want with them, because I own this earth where I am now." He then speaks to the sky and says, "Whoever is up there, those *manidog* up there, I will get them and pull them down. I will play with them here and do just as I please with them. I will even knock down the sky" (41). The spirits of the sky and of the earth convene a council and invite Wenebojo to placate him. In return for not doing what he has threatened, the *manido* from the bottom forms a lump of clay and creates a woman. The *manido* from the sky does the same and creates a man. They then present the man and the woman, the first Indians according to the narrative, to Wenebojo as parents. "They looked the way Wenebojo's parents had looked – the Sun and that woman" (44). Wenebojo's selfishness and threats of destruction again spur an act of creation.

We can see in these sections that, in fact, there is really no way of saying whether Trickster is good or bad for his behavior ranges on a spectrum between destructive and creative, but that even the destructive acts create. Trickster's selfishness causes his second brother to die, but in his departure he creates the spirit world. Trickster's threats to destroy the world result in the creation of the first man and woman by the spirit to

placate Wenebojo. Creation and destruction are both inherent in Trickster. Trickster is not a monolith in himself that we can evaluate as we would human behavior where a person's bad acts make them a bad person or a person's good acts make them a good person, for creation and destruction are linked through the Trickster spectrum. As we turn to the contemporary analogs in Louise Erdrich's works, we must bear in mind that while some Tricksters act more benignly than others, all of them tap into a Trickster spectrum, rather than a single Trickster identity. We will see how destructive Tricksters are motivated by selfishness and creative Tricksters are motivated by their concern for the community, but that all, because they are Tricksters, are important to the repeated cycle of creation and destruction.

## **II. TRICKSTER IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE LAST REPORT ON THE MIRACLES AT LITTLE NO HORSE***

### **Trickster and Identity**

In a short interview for *Publisher's Weekly* magazine, Louise Erdrich says about *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* that it is a book not "so much about gender identity as about identity itself" (Steinberg, 64). The need for Erdrich to specify the issue of gender identity arises from the gender-ambiguous Father Damien of Erdrich's previous novels. We come to find out in *The Last Report* that that ambiguity is warranted: Father Damien is, in fact, a woman, Agnes DeWitt. If then, this book is not about gender identity, *per se*, but identity itself, the methods of analyzing Trickster identity we have looked at in the oral narrative of Tom Badger are a fantastic beginning to understanding

not only Father Damien's character, but to further reveal the workings of Trickster morality. Because the main plot of the book involves a shift in attention from the supposed miracles performed by Sister Leopolda, *nee* Pauline Puyat, to making a case for the sainthood of Father Damien, we have an opportunity to analyze how the novel evaluates their behavior, individually, and the behavior of Trickster, generally. Erdrich has also offered an opportunity to look at spiritual syncretism – not just the *a la carte* picking from two different faith-traditions, but the harmonious coexistence of two different faith-traditions.

We can see how gender identity is unimportant by first looking at the *berdache*, a man defying gender boundaries and given the social status of a woman. Kashpaw is the first American Indian Damien meets and, after riding with Damien from the station to the reservation, the narrator writes:

He [Kashpaw] was a shrewd man, and he sensed something unusual about the priest from the first. Something wrong. The priest clearly not right, too womanly. Perhaps, the thought, here was a man like the famous Wishkob, the Sweet, who had seduced many other men and finally joined the family of a great war chief as a wife, where he had lived until old, well loved, as one of the women. Kashpaw himself had addressed Wishkob as grandmother. Kashpaw thought, *This priest is unusual, but then, who among the zhaaganaashiwug is not strange?* (*Last Report*, 64; emphasis original).

Kashpaw does not make a moral evaluation of either Wishkob's gender transgression or his sexuality.<sup>1</sup> There is in this passage the indication that there are varying and fluid

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<sup>1</sup> As a correlary to this type of tale, two wanderers, Tricksters, in Erdrich's other works are homosexual or bisexual and without question of the ramifications on gender identity: Karl Adare in *The Beat Queen* (1986) and Cyprian Lazarre in *The Master Butcher's Singing Club* (2003), respectively, are both decidedly male characters despite their sexuality. How to respond to wanderers is the central crux to how the other

gender norms and Wishkob's sexuality only confirmed his status of female and did not necessarily predicate it; however, he is accorded all of the benefits from this status with a resonant familial comfort – Kashpaw called Wishkob “grandmother”. Female Agnes DeWitt turned male Father Damien Modeste is an interpretation of the story Kashpaw has told about Wishkob, albeit with gender crossing reversed, and this type of boundary crossing is a familiar Trickster trope. In fact, in calling Father Damien a *zhaaganaashiwug*, as something of an Other, Damien is crossing into another Trickster domain.

The *berdache* is only the first element of how gender identity is subsumed in this Trickster interpretation; gender expectations are varied and men or women are valued for individual strengths rather than any conformity to gender norms. We can see how Kashpaw values his wives individually and how no single strength is paramount, to Kashpaw or to his construction of ideal femininity, when Nanapush seeks to take one of Kashpaw's wives. Father Damien abets Nanapush's trick by noting that as Kashpaw and Margaret were married in the Church, she is his spiritual wife. Kashpaw is convinced and attempts to decide which wives will go. In his deliberation, we can see how there are many types of feminine graces that are equally appreciated by Kashpaw:

Thinking of parting with Mashkiigikwe, of not hearing her bold call as she entered the clearing with good news of her hunting, that was unthinkable. Not to laugh at her jokes or wonder at her kindness to her sister, Quill, whom she had begged Kashpaw to marry in order to save her from facing a situation in which her peculiarities of mind were exploited. No, he could not grasp what would happen if Mashkiigikwe were to leave. And yet Fishbone, pregnant, could not be the one to leave either. Vulnerable as

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characters deal with the general identity of Trickster and both of their partners decide that letting them wander, even in and out of their lives, is for the best.

she was, and helpless, she must surely stay. She had no family to return to. Kashpaw tried not to allow the vision of her calm grace to sway him, or his wish to curve her against him at night, to feel the heat of her gravid body. ... And he loved Margaret as well. Her acid humor pleased him and the times she allowed him near, unexpectedly, her startling inventiveness and bold behavior overwhelmed him with admiration. Besides, she was the first of his wives, and they had come to each other very young and as virgins. ... The children came one after the next, and each was stronger and more intelligent than he had any right to wish. No, Margaret could not leave. Impossible (100-1).

In choosing Quill, Kashpaw is acknowledging her state of helplessness alone. His marrying her, over the traditional and Catholic wedding bonds he has made to the individual wives, is an act of charity for her restless mind. No judgment, then, is passed over which of the graces he most admires in his wives<sup>2</sup>: Mashkiigikwe's hunting abilities; Fishbone's "calm grace"; or the humor and familiarity of Margaret, his first and Church-married wife who had borne so many intelligent and strong children to bear his legacy.

With Kashpaw as the cipher, we can see how gender construction is truly arbitrary. Kashpaw does not value any one of his wives' strengths as more feminine than another. His acceptance of Wishkob, who asserts his femininity by fiat although he is a man and is accepted by the community as a woman solely because he chooses to identify as a woman, demonstrates how whatever boundary is constructed is actually a fluid boundary.

Ultimately, then, we can see how gender is another type of form for Trickster.

Gender is not essential to identity because of its ambiguity and because of the

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<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Eli and Nector Kashpaw are said to be twins in almost every regard in *Tracks*, but each is accepted for equal but separate skills: Eli for his strength and his hunting ability and Nector for his mental acuity and shrewdness (39-40).



community's acceptance of those who operate in that state of ambiguity. In this regard, it is an interpretation of Trickster: Badger says Nanapush "looked just like a human baby boy" without indicating whether he was or was not human or a boy (Badger, 14). Gender is just another form that Trickster can shift between and amongst; when a gender becomes limiting to Trickster's freedom, he abandons it. Agnes is successfully male and female. In her first conversation with Kashpaw as Father Damien, Agnes meditates on how "she'd always felt too inhibited to closely question men. Questions from women to men always raised questions of a different nature. As a man, she found that Father Damien was free to pursue all questions with frankness and ease" (62). On the other hand, though, Berndt Vogel, Agnes DeWitt's common-law husband, notices that in her woman's clothes, "she looked so comfortable, so free. She'd taken on a hardiness" (19). (Again, notice the operative verb is "looked.") It is not to say, then, that Agnes was simply a man in a woman's body; because she is a Trickster, each form has its own requirements, each form is useful, and each is a path of freedom for Trickster. Trickster's movement can be constrained by form just as it was constrained by his brothers. This taste of freedom for the sake of inquisitive curiosity<sup>3</sup>, to question with "frankness and ease", is akin to the full freedom to travel that so attracts Wenebojo and which necessitates the death of his brothers.

Just as destruction was necessary to Wenebojo's travels and to the creation of the spirit road, a "death" of Agnes DeWitt is necessary for the birth of Father Damien Modeste. Equally important to the analogy between Wenebojo and *Last Report*, is that this act of creation from destruction takes place after a flood. "Blessed One," writes Father Damien to the Pope, "I now believe in that river I drowned in spirit, but revived. I

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<sup>3</sup> An apt phrase to describe Agnes and Trickster: "her curious nature led her down tangled pathways" (38).

lost an old life and gained a new. Memories resurfaced. ... I looked at the banks as I swept by and I wondered why Agnes was sad in such a strange world. Things look different from the middle of a flooded river. In that flow, time is erased. I had new eyes” (41). Creation from destruction and the sense of timelessness are inherited from the Trickster cycle.

In his first night at Little No Horse, Father Damien meditates on a feeling of loss: the loss not of identity, generally, but of the ‘Agnes’ identity as she put on the guise of Father Damien: “She lived at night in the shelter of bedclothes. Disappeared in daylight, bandages wrapped as when she had been a nun” (76). When Agnes completes the effect, she does so magically by willing her menstruation to stop, noting that “she felt a pang, a loss, an eerie rocking between genders” (78). This rocking indicates a rather fluid crossing between the boundaries, as if a return is possible, which does manifest when Agnes begins her sexual affair with Father Gregory Wekkle. In fact, during the duration of the affair she rocks back and forth daily between the “female lover” and the “male priest”. Continuing,

As she left the cabin, her thoughts became Damien’s thoughts. Her voice his voice, which deepened as his stride lengthened and grew bold. Agnes’s speech had always been husky and low for a woman. Father Damien’s voice was musical, for a man. *There were gestures left over from the convent, and also from her life as a woman in love.* In the convent, she’d been taught to walk with eyes downcast. Now, Father Damien tipped his chin out and narrowed his gaze, focused straight ahead. As a farm wife, Agnes had leaned out and shut with her hip. Men didn’t use their hips as shelves and braces. Father Damien walked with soldierly directness and never swayed. ... Between these two, where was the real self? *It came to her that both Sister Cecilia and the Agnes were as heavily*

*manufactured of gesture and pose as was Father Damien.* And within this, what sifting of identity was she? What mote? What nothing? ... She decided to miss Agnes as she would a beloved sister, to make of Father Damien her creation. He would be loving, protective, remote, and immensely disciplined. He would be Agnes's twin, her masterwork, her brother (76-7, emphasis added).

Once again, then, in Father Damien's make-up of the Trickster, we have the theme of the familial relationship, the sibling relationship, to the different identities that Tricksters take on and their affect on the product as a whole. Agnes describes the Trickster identity, in any given moment or amidst any given tricks; she considers it "the most sincere lie a person could ever tell" (61).

What unites these separate identities, these separate forms, is how they reflect each other. To complete the appearance of Father Damien, for instance, Agnes binds her breasts as she did when she was Sister Cecilia. Later, Father Jude Miller, who is investigating the possible sainthood of Sister Leopolda, notices about Father Damien:

Just before entering, he turned to the younger priest in a crack of darkness from the doorway. He waved his fingers, beneficent, as though dispensing drops of holy oil. Father Jude blinked. In that instant a strange thing happened. He saw, inhabiting the same cassock as the priest, an old woman. She was a sly, pleasant, contradictory-looking female of stark intelligence. He shook his head, craned forward, but no, there was Father Damien again, tottering into the comfort of his room (139).

This passage emphasizes the entirely fluid nature of Trickster's shape-shift and it is important that the effect is not so much any doing of Trickster's, but an effect of the eye for the person viewing the shifting: "As he watched Father Damien closely, that troubling sensation once more came upon him. *It was a problem of perception.* A distinct uncanny sense he could only name in one way. 'Father Damien, if you don't

mind my asking, have you got a twin?' 'I do not.' 'Never mind.' Jude shook his head to clear his *vision*" (146, emphasis added). That Jude describes the "uncanny sense" as if Damien had a twin is notable as it harks back to the Wenebojo cycle. Finally, when Agnes decides to use the money she took from the Actor, a bank robber, to buy a piano rather than do some charitable deed, she acknowledges this multipersonality: she spends it on the piano, "Not as Damien. Not as Agnes. Not as priest and not as woman, not as confessor and not as the magnet of souls, consoler, professor of the faith. When it came right down to it, she acted as an artist" (222).

The importance of gender identity is negated, too, in that Agnes does not feel called to be a man necessarily; she is called, in Trickster fashion, to travel. After meeting, and teasing, the original Father Damien Modeste, Agnes notices that:

Into her brooding there intruded an absurd fantasy, the possibility of escape, though it was to a place few would consider so—the mission and the missionary life. She thought of doing good. Alleviating the pain that others felt might help to assuage her own. She began to pray, asked to regain the clarity of her original religious impulse (37).

What is important to note is that Agnes is called to the missionary life by the impulse to do good because it is essential to how we judge her character, despite transgressing not only the gender boundary, but also the boundary between lay and clerical. We can see, also, how travel is not just a desire, but a "religious impulse" – a calling to move.

### **Trickster and Religious Syncretism**

To confirm Agnes's Trickster status, she engages in two important acts of mythical action. As I mentioned, she wills her menstruation to stop. She also, though, is

able to conduct the miracle of the Eucharist: transubstantiation. Damien says his first mass for the sisters of the convent:

“Qui pridie quam pateretur, accepit panem in sanctas ac venerabiles manus suas...” And lifted his eyes and said the words “Hoc est enim corpus meum,” and the bread was flesh.

Of course it was, as it always was.

“Hic est enim calyx sanguinis mei novi et aeterni testamenti: mysterium fidei,” and the bread was flesh (68).

... Agnes was caught in a panic of emotion. ... Was it really true and had they, as well, experienced what she'd felt? ... Had the dry thin consecrated Host turned into a thick mouthful of raw, tender, bloody, sweet-tasting meat in the mouths of the sisters? And the wine to vital blood? And were they full, as Agnes felt, satisfied and calm?” (69).

Simply, Agnes's wonder confirms the fact that from the Catholic perspective, Agnes DeWitt, a woman and a non-cleric, should not have been able to perform the miraculous act. We have to explain the miracle, then, by acknowledging it as a Trickster act. A principle of this spiritual syncretism is that power comes from the transgression of boundaries, as opposed to creating boundaries around power to contain it and to limit who can exercise power. Father Jude demonstrates this principle in an argument with Father Damien. “...It is just that certain norms of behavior are taken for granted. Right. Wrong. These are simply distinguished. Black is black and white is white” (134-5). To this, Damien responds that not only is the mixture gray, but that he has “never seen the truth ...without crossing my eyes” (135). The argument is precipitated in part by Father Damien saying that he cherishes his flock's sometime sexual indiscretions. Father Jude believes that “intercourse outside the boundaries of marriage hurts the order of things. Creates disorder. Breaks traditions, vows, families. Creates such...problems” (135).

The disagreement offers an appropriate example of Father Damien's trickster nature, for sex is one of the many earthly pleasures that motivate Trickster in his tricks<sup>4</sup>.

Father Damien's spiritual syncretism is one that acknowledges and allows spiritual parallels. Like the multipersonality of Trickster, she sees a multipersonality in God: "Trudging to the homes of the stricken, Agnes wondered, where was the Trinity? Any one of them would do, she thought in exhausted fury, God the Father, God the Son, God the Son of a Bitch, God the Holy Ghost" (121)<sup>5</sup>. Like Trickster, the Christian concept of God and Savior include different aspects and, yet, remain in one essence. Importantly, too, she includes not only the usual aspects of the Trinity, but also the dark aspect she sees: "God the Son of a Bitch." Asserting that the paths to the same essential being, Trickster or God, lead to the same power no matter the method, the narrator observes that:

four times a day ... Agnes and Father Damien became that *one person* who addressed the unknown. ... She preferred the Ojibwe word for praying, *anama'ay*, with its sense of a great *motion* upward. She began to address the trinity as four and to include the spirit of each direction—those who sat at the four corners of the earth. Where she prayed, she made of herself a temporary center of those directions. There, she allowed herself to fall apart. Disintegrated into pieces of creation, which God might pick up and turn curiously this way and that to catch the light. What a relief it was, for those moments, to be nothing, a smashed thing, and to have no thought or expectation. Whether God picked up the fragments and stuck them back together, or casually swept them aside was of no consequence either to Agnes or Father Damien (182, emphasis added).

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<sup>4</sup> To further demonstrate the Trickster parallel, when Agnes first comes to Berndt Vogel's farm, her first statements are, in German, of bodily concern: "I am hungry" (13) and "Now I must sleep" (17); translations are mine.

<sup>5</sup> Pauline, too, uses a mixed-reverence multi-nomenclature for God in *Tracks* when she addresses God after the death of Fleur's second child as "Lord," but also "Author of all Lies" (158).

This method to spirituality emphasizes themes common to both faith traditions: the flood Wenebojo triggers, and also the flood of Noah, for instance. At the same time that Agnes desires the creative-destructive cycle of Wenebojo, she sees an act of God as the catalyst between destruction and creation. Appropriately, too, Father Damien comes to look on conversation as “a most ticklish concept and a most loving form of destruction” (55).

To be sure, Agnes sincerely believes what she believes, but what she upholds is not the certain beliefs of either extreme. Agnes does not waffle in her beliefs, but instead sincerely believes in what lies in the middle where the two traditions reflect and enhance one another. Agnes is not alone in believing piously along the fault line separating the Christian and Indian spheres. In treating Quill’s madness, Kashpaw tries traditional medicine, but Quill calls for the priest instead (100). Kashpaw notices that:

This young priest possessed a surprising power, one he seemed unaware of, which made it all the more effective. The young priest had calmed Quill and made her happy. His mere presence had affected the change. After his visit, Quill fell to her knees whenever her mind swelled. By striking her breast and crying out in her own words a message to the priest’s god, she emptied her mind of the deadly thing that possessed it. Nothing else, no doctoring, had helped. But the priest, she liked (101).

When Sister Leopolda appears to be seized by spirits, the people come to witness the marvel, considered part of Leopolda’s miraculous deeds, but also come to witness the possible Christian saint with traditional symbols, too. For instance, “Zozed Bizhieu asked Sister Hildegarde to place in Pauline’s bed a red-painted stick, which represented a request for help of a sort she wouldn’t specify” (129). In this act, too, we see how totems of both Catholic spirituality – witnessing a miracle – and American Indian spirituality –

the red stick – are used by the people of Little No Horse and how each is regarded with reverence.

### **Trickster Morality**

We come, again, to Trickster's morality and, more importantly, how to evaluate Trickster's deeds for, in shifting support from Sister Leopolda's sainthood to supporting Father Damien's, we are invited to share in Father Jude Miller's evaluation of the two personages. Trickster is neither good nor bad: Trickster's acts are more benign, mostly, when he is acting in a community, like with the beavers. Had Wenebojo just accepted that his peeking at the grease-making with the wolves was just cause for being hit in the eye and not exacted revenge, everyone might have laughed at Wenebojo's foolishness; when he acted out of unwarranted vengeance, though, it made him intolerable and the wolves abandoned him. His unleashing of the deluge is acceptable, not only because, with perspective, we can see it as part of a cycle of destruction and creation, but because he killed the underwater *manidog* out of a reasonable desire to avenge the death of his brother-wolf. Destruction is inherent in Trickster's nature and we have to be comforted by the fact that out of destruction, Trickster also brings creation. When he threatens destruction, though, as we saw in the end of the myth cycle, not even the great spirits of the sky and the underworld are willing to risk Wenebojo making good on the threat and so they comfort him with the creation of parents.

The problem of evaluating Trickster's deeds can be illuminated by looking at a minor Trickster character in *The Last Report*: the bank robber, Arnold "the Actor" Anderson. The Actor encompasses most of the main Trickster habits: Anderson is a



traveler, he and his troupe “plundered the countryside at will, appearing as though from nowhere and descending into the towns with pitiless ease” (23). Additionally, the Actor gets his nickname by the success he has had in changing form and changing frequently: “The car—the color of which was always reported differently: white one time, gray the next, even blue . . . . The passenger who emerged was sometimes an old man, other times a pregnant woman, a crippled youth, someone who inspired others to acts of polite assistance” (23). At the same time that he “was entirely ruthless and cared nothing for human life,” he also “was said to be quite charming as he shot people, even funny. Eight people in the last two years had perished laughing” (23). (In a foreshadowing of later trickery and a marvelous demonstration of the humor in Trickster stories, Agnes encounters the Actor on a robbery in which he is dressed, unconvincingly to Agnes, as a priest. In fact, it is Agnes who notices and says “loudly and clearly, in an amused tone of voice, ‘Sir, why this pretense? You are not a priest!’” (25).)

The Actor’s behavior ranges the entire gambit of the Trickster identities: transitory, form-changing, charming, and, especially as a bank robber, entirely on the outskirts of the mainstream. We can see how dark tricks become intolerable because the Actor is motivated by greed; his destruction is not collateral damage, destruction is his intent. It is important to contrast him with behavior by Nanapush: although Nanapush engages in a trick by going with Father Damien to Kashpaw’s, although he desires to gain a wife through the trick, the resulting breakdown of Kashpaw’s family is not his intent: “No it wasn’t that Nanapush wanted to destroy his friend’s family and peace of mind, or even that he had to have one of those wives . . . . It was only that he saw what he saw, and the time was coming” (88).

To be sure, Agnes DeWitt perpetrates a nearly life-long trick against the people of Little No Horse, no matter how well some of them may see through the trick. Nanapush notes that Damien “was of course much younger, oddly feminine, and a good deal subtler than Father Hugo, but that his intentions were fundamentally those of a priest” (91). As a priest, his favorite sacrament was “hearing sins, chewing over people’s stories, and then with a flourish absolving and erasing their wrongs, sending sinners out of the church clean and new. He forgave with exacting kindness, but completely, and prided himself in dispensing unusual penances that fit the sin. People appreciated his interest in their weaknesses as well as his sense of compassionate justice” (5). Damien insists that he has led “a quiet life. I have sought no following, engaged in no behaviors, holy or otherwise, that would bring me notoriety. I have done only as I was directed by Jesus ... I have tried, in other words, to serve God invisibly” (52). When the Devil comes, as a black dog, to take Lulu, Agnes agrees to his offer to spare Lulu if she will come instead. (Laughably, she makes the deal as long as he does not come for her until she is “good and ready” – something the dog agrees to but only after promising to send her temptation, which turns up the next day in the person of Father Gregory.) “A priest puts the welfare of his flock above all else,” Father Damien tells the black dog, “for they are entrusted to him by the author of the world, and so even in this lonely and unspeakable moment, my duty is clear!” (191). Just as Nanapush’s trick is tolerated because it was not his intent to be destructive, Father Damien’s desire to be a worthy servant of his people mitigates the trick Agnes DeWitt is perpetrating. Father Jude concludes that “whatever his belief, Father Damien had acted on the fundamental dictates of a great love. ... He’d put others above himself and lived in the abyss of doubt rather than forsake those in need” (239).

Damien, in one sentence, acknowledges Sister Leopolda as both “nemesis and savior” (102). As the catalyst of death, though, Sister Leopolda appears to be most frightening. We have seen how Wenebojo’s character is shaped by a desire to travel and how this desire was manifested in Agnes in her calling to become Father Damien. Not all Tricksters, as we saw with the Actor, are motivated by good intentions. Dark Tricksters, those who are more destructive than creative, are forged from destruction. For instance, Pauline Puyat is motivated by a self-pitying, black heart. Pauline’s mother, also Pauline Puyat, was commanded by her father to kill her mother when she was young. The first Pauline’s mother feared the girl’s enactment of her father’s command and so beat and starved her (155). In later life, she bore the girl who would become Sister Leopolda and raised her in “purified bitterness” (157). Father Damien attempted to explain Sister Leopolda by noting “the slow formation of certain seductive poisons in the personality that both slow and require judgment. This killing hatred between mother and daughter was passed down and did not die when the last Pauline became a nun. As Sister Leopolda she was known for her harsh and fearsome ways” (157). To Father Damien, Pauline was “the warped result of all that twisted her mother. She was what came next, beyond the end of things. She was the residue of what occurred when some of our grief-mad people trampled their children. Yes, Leopolda was the hope and she was also the poison” (158). Trickster can be a powerful healer, but that power to create can be thwarted by one whose motivation is dark and destructive.

Unlike the miracles that Father Damien conducts, triggered by his Trickster power, Sister Leopolda’s miracles all have a dark and nefarious explanation. In investigating a case of stigmata that had supposedly been inspired by Leopolda’s sanctity,

Father Jude Miller discovers that it was, in fact, not created by the holy intercession of Leopolda, but by Leopolda stabbing the girl with a fork (136). Her main miracle, the period of rigidity when Zozed Bizhieu asked Sister Hildegarde Anne to place a red-painted stick in her bed, was in fact not a “miraculous possession...was not the visionary trance her sisters supposed, but tetanus” (328). Worst of all, the tetanus was contracted when Leopolda murdered Napoleon Morrissey. Nowhere is Napoleon Morrissey looked upon kindly, but his murder is particularly ghastly. Leopolda recounts how she choked him with a barbed wire rosary:

I strung the noose around his neck and counted each bead in my fingers as I tightened the link. The joyful and the sorrowful mysteries, Father Damien, and him pounding and thrashing under me and taking his good time choking so I went dizzy with the effort of holding him. God held those beads along with me, his strength the grip of lions. My fingers closed like hasps of iron, locked on the rosary, and wrenched and twisted the beads close about his neck until his face darkened and he lunged away. I hung on while he bucked and gagged and finally fell, his long tongue dragging down my thigh (273).

When Damien insists that she turn herself over to the authorities before he can absolve her, Leopolda reveals that she knows Damien’s secret and threatens to tell the bishop. This blackmail is akin to the destruction of the world that Wenebojo threatened. Damien realizes that “were he exposed, were he known to have fooled, deceived, and hidden his most fundamental nature, all would be lost. Married couples Father Damien had joined would be sundered. Babies unbaptized and exposed to the dark powers. Deaths unblesed and sins again weighing on poor sinners” (276). So, he absolves her of the sin of murder. When the black dog returns, Agnes realizes that her forgiveness has again manifested rewards. The black dog claims to have killed Morrissey through the hands of

the nun and asks how it is possible that Leopolda could be forgiven. Agnes has the realization:

It was then that Agnes was assured that her Father Damien had done the right thing in absolving all who asked forgiveness, and the realization filled her with a sudden and buoyant strength. Here it was—the reason she'd been called here in the first place. The reason she'd endured and the reason she'd been searching for. . . . She saw that forgiveness as a long, slow, soaking rain he had caused to fall on the dry hearts of sinners. Father Damien had forgiven everyone, right and left, of all mistakes and shameful sins (309).

Unlike Leopolda, who can not forgive and who, in fact, blames others for all her troubles, Father Damien is redeemed by his unfailing ability to forgive. We can see in this passage a lesson from the oral narrative where Wenebojo's inability to forgive causes him to be left behind by the wolves and also triggers the deluge. If any one factor redeems Agnes DeWitt for her tricks, well intended or not, it is that she uses the power of Father Damien to forgive.

### **III. TRICKSTER IN *FOUR SOULS***

#### **Revenge**

At the beginning of his mission at Little No Horse, the narrator notes that Father Damien had “only the vaguest notion of how the ownership of land related to the soul” (*Last Report*, 76). The world Damien has entered is ripe with Trickster traces:

The reservation at the time was a place still *fluid of definition*, appearing solid only on a map. . . . It was a place of *shifting allegiances*, new feuds and old animosities, a place of clan teasing, jealousy, comfort, and love.

... *So the boundaries came and went, drawn to accommodate local ventures—sawmills, farms, feed stores, the traplines of various families. As the government scrambled for the correct legal definition of the land, any fluctuation meant loss, any loophole was to the advantage of the thieves, boosters, businessmen, swindlers, sneaks, Christians, cranks, lumber and farm dealers, con artists, and reprobates of all types who had drifted to the edges of the reservations hoping to profit from the confusion* (75-6, emphasis added).

The words may be applied literally to the lines on the map, but with so much fluidity, shifting, and changing boundaries, we should not be surprised to encounter a Trickster ready to take advantage of the changing times. According to Damien, “one name appears and reappears among the papers that I handle,” the name of our Trickster, “John Jacob Mauser” (106).

Damien’s description of Mauser, like the description of the reservation, contains familiar Trickster traces, as well. According to Damien, “Mauser is a man whose actual person, if not identity, is mysterious. ... He is a restless man...Mauser prospers with every fumble.” Mauser desires land, and the trees on the land, and he gets land by whatever trick possible: “He went from land speculation into lumber, minerals, quarries. He now purchases areas lost to the continual census that shows a dwindling number of Indians. He buys the land tax forfeited. He buys the land by having the Ojibwe owners declared incompetent” (106). The verb ‘buy’ is important in this passage because none of these methods seems to adhere to our sense of legitimate purchase: Mauser does not legally cheat anyone out of land, but none of his purchases are conducted in an equal seller-to-buyer method. When he does offer money to the American Indians who own the land, “he offers what seems a vast sum of money to each head of household, so much

money that it seems unthinkable to turn it down” (107). Damien notes that most people sell, when directly offered, because of one thing alone: “Hunger” (75). If Trickster is motivated most by his organic desires, then Mauser has found a way to gain when organic desire is all the people have left. Fleur Pillager is one of the people Mauser cheats.

One way we can be certain of Mauser’s Trickster credentials is to take note of the fact that he is talked about more than he speaks. Like Wenebojo, Mauser lacks interiority, at least until we encounter him in *Four Souls*. All of Erdrich’s works are told multivocally, which is to say that characters take turns narrating the plot. Mauser, like Fleur, is never one of those telling the story. Like Wenebojo, whose stories are never told in first-person but always narrated by multiple narrators, we only encounter Mauser’s or Fleur’s thoughts, or what thoughts we are allowed to know, by report.

*Four Souls* begins with the arrival of Fleur at Mauser’s mansion with the intention of recovering her stolen land. Mauser is a desperately sick man who sweats so much in his sleep that his bed linens must be changed in the middle of the night. Sedatives make him a “paralyzed lump” (25), reminiscent of Wenebojo’s brother, the stone. Mauser’s sister-in-law, Polly Elizabeth, runs the household and hires Fleur to do the extra laundry. Shortly after Fleur’s arrival, Mauser is debilitated by a seizure and Fleur cures him, massaging his limbs each in turn and calming him. To be sure, Fleur “did those good things for her own benefit, not his” (22). “When Fleur saw how Mauser already suffered,” however, “she felt cheated of her revenge. She wanted the man healthy so that she could destroy him fresh” (24). This desire – to cure in order to destroy – is also reminiscent of the destruction-creation cycle of the Wenebojo tales.

Cured of his illness, Mauser returns to his Trickster self:

Now he was apt to fetch things for himself and replace them where he pleased. And although this may seem like a small thing, it was in fact a very large thing that he did. *For he was unpredictable now—he could be here, he could be anywhere.* And the objects he left and was able to reach often surprised people and put them on guard. It had been much easier for everyone, of course, when he was a paralyzed lump” (25, emphasis added).

In addition to his unpredictability, we learn about Mauser’s Trickster identity that “his heritage was more than exaggerated, *it was a disgraceful lie*, although his wealth was not. He was financially unharmed by all market tremors *and even benefited from every crisis*” (35, emphasis added). Taken by Fleur, Mauser has his first marriage annulled in order to marry Fleur. Taking advantage of Trickster’s desires, he woos her with travel, food, and sex:

He took her traveling, brought her to theaters and great halls where she heard a new and violently beautiful music. They went to places where a thousand pictures were stored on their walls. He fed her the flesh of animals she’d never tasted. The meat of fruits she’d never seen. He seemed to get a hold over her in bed, too—perhaps some *chimookomaan* form of *manaa* that wrecked her resolve, at least for a short time after their marriage (74).

Fleur, too, demonstrates her Trickster abilities. When she comes to Mauser’s mansion, she is dirty and dressed in a simple brown suit (11-2) and speaking a “vagabond tongue” (68), but as Mauser’s wife, Polly Elizabeth notes that Fleur has a talent for “duplicitous” (15) and is “a talented mimic” who “quickly perfected her carriage, manners, behavior, by steady observation of other women” (87). She takes advantage of the routine of the house, memorizing the sound of the steps of each person in it (24) and which floorboards



creak (26), knowledge Mauser also possesses (29). When his investments begin to fail and his wealth diminishes, Mauser takes what wealth he can and runs. “He was to wander the earth,” Polly Elizabeth remarks, “leaving me to clean up the copious mess of his belongings” (159). Fleur returns to the reservation “only to be told that Mauser had taken his turn after her in not paying his taxes,” and that the Indian agent, Jewett Parker Tatro, now owns her land. In true Trickster fashion, Mauser leaves problems for other people to solve.

### **Games of Chance**

Critic John Purdy writes, “Fundamentally, all ‘games of chance’ are games of change and power over it,” and that Erdrich’s works demonstrate “the efficacy of understanding the nature of possibility, of cusp, and employing it to one’s advantage” (Purdy, 10). Again we have the key Trickster themes: change, possibility, and using the power of change and possibility to Trickster’s advantage. It is important to remember, then, that Mauser gained part of his wealth through land speculation, a form of real estate gambling. Additionally, Fleur ultimately wins her land back not from seeking revenge on Mauser, but in winning a game of poker with Jewett Tatro.

From *Tracks*, we can discern Fleur’s Trickster identity. Pauline Puyat narrates that, after she has been nursed to health after an influenza epidemic, Fleur returns to her allotment and begins to display what Pauline thinks is unusual behavior:

Alone out there, she went haywire, out of control. She messed with evil, laughed at the old women’s advice and dressed like a man. She got herself into some half-forgotten medicine, studied ways we shouldn’t talk about (*Tracks*, 12).

In this passage, we can see the familiar Trickster tropes: a desire to be solitary, to transgress boundaries, and to engage in magical or healing acts. Pauline continues to describe the “half-forgotten medicine” that Fleur practices, the powers that medicine confers, and of Fleur’s shape-shifting:

She laid the heart of an owl on her tongue so she could see at night, and went out, hunting, not even in her own body. We know for sure because the next morning, in the snow or dust, we followed the tracks of her bare feet and saw where they changed, where the claws sprang out, the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt. By night we heard her chuffing cough, the bear cough. By day her silence and the wide grin she threw to bring down our guard made us frightened. . . . During those months, when Fleur lived a few miles south in Argus, things happened. *She almost destroyed that town* (12, emphasis added).

Fleur travels to Argus, a ‘white’ town near to the reservation, in order to raise the money necessary to pay the fees on her land. She gets a job at Kozka’s butcher shop where she begins to play in a regular poker game with three of the men who work in the shop. Fleur woos the men in Trickster fashion according to Pauline:

She knew the effect she had on men, even the very youngest of them. She swayed them, sotted them, made them curious about her habits, drew them close with careless ease and cast them off with the same indifference. . . . They were blinded, they were stupid, they only saw her in the flesh (16, 18).

Fleur woos the men because they do not suspect that a woman or an Indian could be a good card player. Then, Fleur performs the trick: Pauline “watched Fleur’s hands stack and riffle, divide the cards, spill them to each player in a blur, rake and shuffle again. . . . She turned, looked straight at me, and grinned the white wolf grin a Pillager turns on its victims, except that she wasn’t after me” (19). Fleur bets, too, as a trick; she understands

the odds better than the men and uses it to her advantage: “They stuck with poker, or variations, for one solid week and each time Fleur won exactly one dollar, no more and no less, *too consistent for luck*” (21, emphasis added). The men begin to feel comfortable with Fleur’s routine and decide to press the advantage by raising the stakes. Again, Trickster takes advantage of people’s comfort with routine. They think Fleur will not play in a higher stakes game because she only wins a dollar a night; she plays. They think Fleur cannot bluff and when she appears to be trying, they salivate to see her cards and declare their win, but, when the cards are shown, Fleur has won: “Fleur threw out her arms and swept the money close, grinning that same wolf grin that she’d used on me, the grin that had them” (23). The next morning, “Fleur was gone” (26).

In *Four Souls*, then, Fleur returns to Little No Horse to get her land back with the deed Mauser has signed to her. She goes to the agency office to press her claim.

Nanapush remarks that:

Nobody but me seemed to wonder why it should be the same repeat visit at the same time of the day every day. It didn’t take me long to recognize Fleur’s poker game, the one she had played for Argus men’s wages, where she raked them in slow with a hunter’s patience and then sprang her trap. *Routine was her favorite strategy. Odd, annoying, humble. And dangerous* (*Four Souls*, 186).

She learns, finally, that Mauser has defaulted on the taxes and that Jewett Tatro, the government agent and another Trickster-like character, who “should not have been allowed to buy reservation land at all,” has taken advantage of a “*loophole year*, during which the state government had passed a bill that allowed such transfers. The bill was found to contradict federal law and so was nullified, but not quickly enough to prevent Tatro’s *smooth theft*” (187, emphasis added). Tatro’s “theft” is reminiscent of Mauser’s

‘purchase’ of land: not necessarily properly ‘bought’ but gained by loopholes and trickery. Luckily for Fleur, Tatro has organized

an endless, low-stakes poker game ... the reservation’s purgatory ... [where] there was a fixed and yet shifting amount of money that might be owned or owed but eventually went back into the game so that over the years the figures and the numbers hovered in the air like an abstract cloud (189-90).

This timeless, abstract purgatory is reminiscent of another episode in Fleur’s gambling after the birth of Fleur’s second child. Fleur nearly dies from the labor and has to concoct herbal medicine to keep the baby alive. Pauline, who served as midwife, notes that despite the medicine, Fleur is dying and will take her second child with her. She has a vision of Fleur, traveling on the spirit road. To demonstrate the centrality of gambling to Ojibwa spirituality in Erdrich’s works, we have the words of Pauline who tells us that in the spirit world gambling is pervasive:

In the heaven of the Chippewa there is gambling with spears of wood and rounded stones. There is gambling with deer knuckles, small brown bones, cards, dice, and human teeth. Snips of copper, bone buttons, iron rings and coins and dollar bills are piled around the players for stakes. ... They play for drunkenness, or sorrow, or loss of mind. They play for ease, they play for penitence, and sometimes for living souls (*Tracks*, 160).

In the vision, Fleur plays a game of poker against the spirits of the men she played against at Kozka’s. The men had been killed in a tornado the day after Fleur’s departure from Argus when they seek shelter in a meat locker and leave Pauline and Russell Kashpaw, who was also in Argus, in the storm. Pauline traps the men in the meat locker

as revenge for their attack on Fleur<sup>6</sup>. The first hand is played for the life of her newborn, but Fleur loses. On the second hand, they play for the life of Fleur's daughter, Lulu, who is presently near death in the snow while on her way to get help for Fleur. Unlike the games in Kozka's butcher shop, where Fleur never had "anything higher than a straight" (21), in the spirit world she wins the hand with "four queens, and last, the one-eyed jack of spades," saving Lulu.

Knowing now who has title to her land and how to get it, Fleur enters Tatro's poker game. She plays a "demure" game. Nanapush says that "she played modest and even and I don't need to tell you, dangerous" (192). Tatro does not see the trick, figuring that she does not need it back because she has returned from Minneapolis with a suit of clothes and a car that Mauser had given to her before he left. Tatro grows bored with the game, which is bad for him because "a person's boredom always worked to Fleur's advantage" (193). Fleur sets her trap by drinking heavily and then by losing enough hands that she began to owe money to the game. She drinks more, wagers her car, and then challenges Tatro to match the wealth of her bet. Everything Tatro offers is insufficient until he finally offers Fleur's land as a wager. Tatro thinks he has the upper-hand because of Fleur's drunken stupor and further thinks the deal is sealed when she takes advantage of a loophole in the game by which a player could hand his cards to a relative if he "couldn't see the cards or had the wit to know his moves were stupid" (196). Nanapush notes that the loophole not only works to Tatro's long-term advantage, but also

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<sup>6</sup> To further demonstrate Pauline's dark trickster qualities, she takes advantage of Russell being swept away by the tornado to equivocate on whether it was Russell or Pauline who actually put the lock in place (27). However, when she encounters the men in the spirit world, Pauline notices that "it was clear from their eyes they knew my arms had fixed the beam in the cradle, back in Argus," and declares as a separate sentence that "I had sent them to this place" (162).

keeps the timeless, abstract quality of the game alive by sucking in more people. So, Fleur passes the cards to her young son, John James Mauser II.

Tatro, on appearance, is right to think that passing the cards is Fleur's comeuppance for Fleur's son is mentally retarded. Polly Elizabeth says about Mauser's son that "he was alert in spirit...though with a stranger he was apt to shut his eyes and become dull and heavy as a stone" (88). The mention of the stone is our first clue that, however, challenged he may be, John James Mauser II is part of a Trickster deception. Further, Polly Elizabeth notices that Fleur has taught "the boy every kind of poker and *gambler's trick* when he couldn't yet recite the alphabet" (89, emphasis added); that "sly hungers developed in him"; and that "where before he had run the household on the whim of his charms, now he ran it by strange dictates of his temperament" (120). As he takes the cards from Fleur, we have all of the indications of a Trickster: in Fleur's son, the remembrance of the stone, one of a set of triplets that includes Wenebojo; Fleur's education of her son in tricks is reminiscent of Wenebojo's tricks; the son's organic desire as sole motivation, again like Wenebojo who tricks for food, sex, or amusement; and, finally, that his world is dictated by his whims, even moodiness, like Wenebojo who grew depressed and threatened to destroy the world until the great spirits themselves were moved to give him succor lest Wenebojo follow through.

Fleur has taken advantage of her little tyrant: Nanapush notices that rather than correct him she has "warped this one. Kept him too close, plied him, spoiled him, sweeted him" (183). Her son, then, is a cipher for her own trick: "the boy got the deal and it was then that the life of him showed, Fleur's part of him, the Pillager," says Nanapush. Tatro realizes his mistake when "the boy's hands swooped out from his

sleeves like starved birds and the cards flew and gathered and divided themselves with a grace that made Tatro gasp,” just like Fleur’s hands when she stunned the men of Kozka’s butcher shop with her skill with cards. “I don’t know if it was then Tatro knew how thoroughly he had been taken,” says Nanapush, “or when he realized that the foolish mask the boy wore was in fact both his real face and unreadable. But for sure he must have known it by the fourth hand and then the fifth. The bet was six hands out of ten and the boy took every one” (197). Tatro has fallen prey to the best trick of the Trickster arsenal: believing in innate qualities of appearance – that what walks like a duck and talks like a duck must be a duck – without knowing that Trickster’s form and behavior takes advantage of the other person’s perception.

### **Restoration**

Unlike Wenebojo, who does not desire any “special place,” Fleur only travels, according to Nanapush, for “revenge...and also restoration” (72). Winning back her land redeems her behavior<sup>7</sup>. As Father Damien noted, the land Little No Horse was being snatched by anyone who wanted it. Nanapush, acknowledging that the Trickster wanderlust is not a desire everyone shares, worries that “our people would turn into a wandering bunch” (80). Damien may have wondered what importance land is to the soul, but Fleur does know: to her it’s a place of reverence where her ancestors are buried and where, although it torments her, she can hear “her vanished child in every breath of wind, every tick of dried leaves, every scratch of blowing snow” (170). Revenge can twist the soul, though, and twisted souls, as we saw with Sister Leopolda/Pauline Puyat wreck too

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<sup>7</sup> What Fleur could not know is that after she dies, her land will be central to an important business venture in another Erdrich work. *The Bingo Palace*. The venture is, appropriately enough for land won in a game of chance, a bingo palace..

much destruction. For that reason, the spirits not only provided Wenebojo with parents, but also taught him the *midewiwin*, or medicine dance (Badger, 44). Tom Badger explains that telling the Wenebojo cycle is also its own succor:

This story I've told you can be told whenever anybody asks for it – anybody who belongs to the *Midewiwin*. Part of it is told when someone is going to join the *Midewiwin* and they tell part of it when they're giving a mourning bowl to someone. ... The last part of the story [Wenebojo threatening the *manidog*] is told to people who have lost a husband or wife or daughter. They tell it to them to take their minds off their troubles (Badger, 45).

To be sure, Fleur, in seeking revenge has left a wake of destruction. Lulu, Fleur's daughter, is one such person who needs succor and the story of *Tracks* is told, in part, to explain to Lulu why her mother abandoned her and to help her forgive Fleur.

Reminiscent of the Wenebojo tale, where Wenebojo buries his second brother to ensure his safety while Wenebojo wanders, Fleur sends Lulu to a government school. Nanapush says of her intent that

Fleur merely took the girl off to hid her the way a wolf hides a pup when she must do battle to protect her standing or confront a danger. That's how it was. Lulu was to be hidden in the government school, safe. Not left, not forgotten (*Four Souls*, 73).

Lulu, however, does not see the government school as safe hiding: she wonders “why did she teach me all this tenderness, this love, if she then threw me in a pit? For that is what the school would be” (*Last Report*, 243). She describes her abandonment as “a black ditch to the side of the road of your life, a sudden washout, a pothole that went down to China” (245). Not learning the necessity of forgiveness, Lulu refuses to go with Fleur when she does come back for her, even denying that Fleur is her mother (252). Lulu



acknowledges herself that she is “not an all-forgiving person, not Lulu” (253) and when Nanapush encourages her to forgive she exclaims: “Fleur had the choice of saving me, her daughter, or having her revenge. *She chose revenge. I choose to hate her for it*” (242, emphasis in original)<sup>8</sup>. Margaret, Nanapush’s wife who had previously been a wife to Kashpaw, fears for Fleur’s son who, “in sorrow for losing Lulu and the time one besides, Fleur had warped” (*Four Souls*, 183). Margaret notices, too, that Fleur “addressed him as her son and never used his name – Christian or Ojibwe. As far as we were concerned, the boy was nameless. For sure, such a thing was no accident. . . . He’d have a name for the whites to call him, but no name for his spirit” (200). When Fleur equivocates about naming her son, wondering “who would dream a name for him? Who would smoke the pipe? Who would introduce his spirit to the name and help his spirit to embrace that name,” Margaret reminds Fleur of her power and position: “You,” she answers (200-1).

Nanapush, confirming the danger of self-pity and revenge that we saw in Sister Leopolda, notes about Fleur that he

Shared with Fleur the mysterious self-contempt of the survivor. There were times we hated who we were, and who we had to become, in order not to follow those we loved into the next world. We grew hard. We became impenetrable, sparing of our pity. Sorrows that leveled other people were small to us. . . . Pain took our minds off the greater pain that was the mistake that we still existed. We had only the barest sympathy for those who brought our losses upon us (21).

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<sup>8</sup> Forgiveness, however, is a lesson Polly Elizabeth learns. She hated Fleur when she arrived at Mauser’s mansion and could have blamed Fleur for her own dismissal. Although Mauser provided a stipend to Placide, his first wife, and Polly Elizabeth, his sister-in-law, their fall in station is due to Mauser’s infatuation with Fleur. Polly Elizabeth, however, realizes that “if I could lay aside my small contempt, I might cherish her” (*Four Souls*, 65) and that “If only one accepts what is given! There could be afternoons of laughter. There could even be happiness. If only one accepts!” (125). This is the lesson the lovers of wandering Tricksters learn in other Erdrich works, as well (see page 20, note 1).

“She fell into the trap,” Nanapush continues, “like Mauser, of pitying herself” (27).

Nanapush knows that the destruction Fleur’s revenge has caused is not limited to the effect it has had on her children, but extends to Fleur’s own well-being. Fleur, in planning her revenge, calls herself Four Souls after her mother, a powerful medicine woman. Names are another form for Trickster in *Four Souls* and a powerful form at that: there are, according to Nanapush, “names that heal a person just for taking them, and names that destroy.” The original Four Souls was named so because the original had

Four souls she could use. Four times she knew in her life that within the year she was meant to die, and so, those four times, she threw out a soul. That soul,” in Trickster fashion, “went about as a bird or animal, the shape of which only she knew. That soul roamed here and there, gaining knowledge of things, then came back and reported to its owner. So Four Souls grew wiser.

Nanapush says, however, that by taking on the name, it “owned” Fleur, and that “it would slam her to the earth and raise her up, it would divide her, it would make her an idiot and nearly kill her, and it would heal her once it had finished humbling her” (47).

Just as Trickster tales are essential to the medicine dance and just as Trickster tales are told as succor for the mourning, so must the Trickster mourn. When Fleur returns, Margaret worries, “perhaps the spirits of all those she had sent on the death road had lined up against her on the other side” (184). In short, Margaret worries that those caught in the Trickster wake now have the ability to block whatever made Fleur powerful in the first place. “You braved all the old wisdom,” Margaret tells her, “you scorned us. You did not listen.” So, Margaret purifies Fleur, sings to her “the song of Four Souls, the song of her name” and then “an old lullaby that made her cry again as she’d last heard it from her long dead mother, Ogimaakwe, Anaquot, Four Souls—she was called all of

those names” (203). Margaret, in comforting Fleur, performs the role of mother just as Wenebojo was comforted by the spirits with new parents. Margaret is more explicit:

“Fleur Pillager was the daughter of my spirit” (184). She assures Fleur that

Myself, old Margaret, who has the vanity to call herself Rushes Bear, loves you as does the crazy old man, Nanapush. Your mother’s spirit and her grandmother’s, all the way back through the generations, love you. Your father and his fathers, too.

Drawing the parallel between Fleur and Wenebojo, of love for Trickster from the *manidog* and of the destruction-creation cycle, Margaret, the substitute parent, continues:

All of these spirits love you, and the spirits in the four layers of the earth and the four skies that exist above us. The crawlers, the fliers, the runners, the swimmers. You are loved in creation though you tried to destroy yourself (204).

“You threw your souls out. You lived,” says Margaret,

Now you must weep over those who died in your place. Mourn your dead properly so you can live properly Fleur. Weep yourself sick. And then from your heart, from under your skin, and from the arrogant shell you call the surface of your mind will come the pain of understanding your loneliness (205).

This passage, too, is reminiscent of the Trickster cycle – Fleur’s souls are like the various forms Trickster takes and Margaret’s call to weep from under her shell recognizes these forms. The shell is an apt metaphor when we think, too, about Father Damien’s realization that his appearance as Sister Cecilia and Agnes DeWitt were just as fraudulent as his appearance as Father Damien. Echoing, again, that creation can only come from destruction, Margaret instructs Fleur to put on the medicine dress, one Margaret was called to make by a vision of material that has never been touched by white people, and then to “forget your power and your strength. Let the dress kill you. Let the dress save

you. ... If you make it through the next eight days, I will give you my medicine dress. Not only that, I will give you the name that goes with it” (206,7). Just as Fleur donned the name Four Souls to summon the power necessary for her revenge, she is to receive a new name when she is restored. Echoing the theme of travel in the Wenebojo cycle, she tells Fleur, “Now is the time for you to walk the middle way” (206).

Fleur is restored and, reminiscent of Tom Badger’s assurance that Wenebojo is still somewhere ‘out there’ – dormant but still alive – Nanapush draws the final Trickster parallels:

Like the spirits, she lives quiet in the woods. No road leads to her place. Hardly even a path. She doesn’t drown men anymore or steal their tongues, she doesn’t gamble. She doesn’t rub her hands with powders of human beings (209-10).

Echoing what we have learned about Trickster – that Trickster exists, most importantly, as an agent of change, that Tricksters can be dark and destructive, that destruction is essential for creation – Nanapush concludes:

Change is chaos and pain. ... Even our bones nourish change, and even a people who lived so close to the bone and were saved for thousands of generations by practical philosophy, even such a people as we, the Anishinaabeg, *can sometimes die, or change, or change and become* (210, emphasis added).

Nanapush’s conclusion reflects the most rebellious nature of Trickster: always present-tense, he overturns the values of normative narrative style of beginning, middle, and end, in favor of an continual process of becoming.

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