

## Ecology, Return, Transgression: Realism in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*

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**Abstract:** In *The Round House*, Louise Erdrich applies double narrative structure and enriches it with traditional native American mythological elements. From an ecological perspective, while focusing on the transgressing plots of Joe and his parents respectively, readers can find many realistic features in the writing strategy of the novel, which has empowered the text with political quest as well as with the objective consideration of Louise Erdrich on the reconstruction of Native American cultural identity in the multiple modern cultural context.

**Keywords:** *The Round House*, Louise Erdrich, ecology, transgression

### 1. Introduction

Rich traditional Native American culture has endowed the contemporary Native American writings with peculiar cultural and literary traits. Many contemporary Native American writers return to the pastoral scenery of the Native American cultural tradition and reconstruct Native American cultural identity in the modern cultural context. In terms of the strategies of modern Native American cultural resurrection, they vary a lot among contemporary Native American writers. In the process, it has been acknowledged that the rich traditional mythological, ecological as well as social elements in Native American culture play an effective role in the construction of the peculiarity of Native American identity in the multi-dimensional cultural context.

The question remains on the ways of the application of those elements in the multi-cultural era which witnesses the fragmentation and marginalization of the Native American culture in order to construct a self-sufficient Native American identity. Is it possible to textually unify the originally separated Native American tribal cultures? How to handle the traditional matrix of “return” in contemporary Native American literature? In the Native American Renaissance movement, the diversified cultural interpretation and writing strategies among Native American writers lead to the differences of writing styles and treatment of their tribal cultures, among which many are limited to the dichotomous mode of confrontation between the hegemonic western white culture and marginalized Native American culture. This pan-Indian belief has wiped out the differences among different Native American tribes, and also tends to interpret the Native American subjectivity as an utopian illusion. As Lucy A. Ganje admitted: “Stereotypical portrayals of American Indian people are a consistent theme on our cultural landscape” (Ganje 113). The simple reproduction of the past, in fact, ignores the historicity and modernity of the Native American culture.

In Louise Erdrich, the re-depiction of the traditional Native American ecological scenery

is not a simple return to the Native tradition, but a more mature consideration with broader ecological and realistic reflections. The settings designed by Louise Erdrich are not the natural environment, but modern towns or cities afflicted by noise and conflicts instead, which not only realistically depict the actual life of contemporary Native Americans, but also reveal Louise Erdrich's ecological idea. In this sense, the novels by Louise Erdrich exhibit two-fold features: on one hand, she is concerned about how an authoritative narrative voice may define and create a power system; on the other hand, she tries to put polyphonic narration in the ecological image and construct the cultural features of modern Native American people by revising traditional Native American cultural elements.

In the novels of Louise Erdrich, she sticks to Chippewa tribal heritage and oral tradition and uses mythological and ecological elements to merge history and reality. Like *Spiderwoman*, she uses the complex English language to weave a realistic net, skillful in the combination of western narrative and Native oral tradition. The novels by Louise Erdrich are characterized by structural complexity and rich textual tension, which portrays a reality co-established by Native American tradition and western modernity and an existential state of contemporary Native Americans with ecological, literary, cultural as well as legal reconsiderations.

## 2. Ecological Inheritance and Mythological Deconstruction

Compared with other ethnic literatures in America, the Native American literature is developed purely in the American continent, while others, such as Asian, black, or Spanish American literatures, are cultural immigrants themselves. In this sense, Native American culture enjoys ample cultural independence, whose ecological belief, cultivated through thousands of years of living experience on the broad American continent, consists of the existential wisdom harvested during the communication between human beings and nature.

In native ecological scenery, all the natural elements are living entities with full vitality and diversity. It comprises not only the ecological connection between human beings and nature, but also the traditional Native American mythological, historical, cultural and moral ideas, in which nature and men are not separated, but organically united. As part of nature, human beings themselves should act in line with the ecological traits in different natural areas and live harmoniously with the local environment. The mutual recognition between human beings and nature exhibits the spiritual self-definition of the Native Americans, which conveys the existential understandings of the Native Americans towards humanity, power, deity and self.

Accordingly, an inner ecological system is embedded in most of the contemporary Native American works, which is characterized by its realistic understanding of the traditional native notion of nature and humanity in the modern environment today. From ecological perspective, many contemporary Native American writers set the modern social environment as the background for plot development and characterization. Viewed from Native natural beliefs, many contemporary Native American novels can be regarded as a textual arena which witnesses the combination and confrontation of various ecological elements, constructing a new Native American social-ecological mechanism in the modern cultural context.

In *The Roundhouse*, Louise Erdrich starts from the living condition of the women in the reservation and presents a new cultural conflict from a realistic perspective. Following the main

plot of pursuit of justice, the novel traces the origin of Native American culture and highlights the essential ecological features that may represent the basics of Native American culture. In the traditional view of space, Native Americans usually put the earth in the center, highlighting its spiritual connection with individual lives. Although creation myths in different Native American tribes vary a lot, the earth occupies the central position of mythological narratives. Also, the Native American notion of space is a grand existential experience with specific understanding of one place, which is applied in contemporary Native American writings.

In *The Round House*, the image of earth is portrayed through the depiction of the garden behind Joe's house and an inner ecological cycle is built accordingly. Louise Erdrich describes the garden in a detailed realistic manner and highlights the interaction between the garden and Joe's family. Spatially speaking, the spiritual remedy of the mother, who has been hurt most seriously, happens in the garden, whose flowers and grass symbolizes the balance of the people's spiritual world, which is in line with the traditional Native American ecological ideas. The garden, a place of spiritual purification and micro-ecological cycling system, suggests the interactive communication between the life and place. For the contemporary Native Americans who have lost vast prairies and lands, it is a more realistic description to portray the garden as a condensed holy earth. The ecological force originating from traditional Native American myths is transmitted to the micro-ecological cycling system and becomes an effective channel for Geraldine Coutts, Joe's mother, for self-healing.

"My mother was outside, kneeling in the dirt of the garden with a colander, picking the bush beans that my father and I had planted late. She dropped down and crawled the row on all fours sometimes. Sat back on her knees. She gave the colander a little jounce, to settle the beans" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 294).

The garden plays a healing and balancing role in the micro-ecological system, as does the earth in the Native American creation myths. Joe and his father Bazil, afflicted with emotional sufferings, have also harvested inner balance in the garden. "We sifted out the old roots and dead stalks and broke up below the surface. Rich. I began to like what I was doing. The ground drained my rage" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 91).

Yet, what Louise Erdrich tries to convey in the novel is not a romantic reflection of the native past. In *The Round House*, Louise Erdrich has shown a keen sense of geological boundary in the portrayal of the central image—the round house. When portraying the dilemma of the contemporary Native Americans today, the novel, from spatial perspective, constructs different characterizations and connects them with thematic construction. Ecologically speaking, the novel constructs the round house as the center of narrative space and endows the legal case with mythological, cultural, and political considerations with double-layer structure. Most of the chapters are narrated by Joe, the 15-year-old boy, while at the same time they build a deep-structure—the mythological narration by Mooshum in his dream about a Native myth, empowering the round house with mythological power. Enriched by the intertextuality between the two narratives, ecological elements are put into the grand multiple narrative structure and endow the novel with vigorous mythological and ecological texture.

From the structure of the double-layer narration, the reader may have a deeper understanding of Louise Erdrich's attitude towards traditional Native American culture and her understanding of the reconstruction of Native American identity today. On one hand, she has inherited

the traditional notion of Native American culture and built the ethnic peculiarity out of it, while on the other hand, she has reconstructed the traditional cultural scenery with realistic reconsideration.

In *The Round House*, one of the most featured techniques is the double-layer narration. In the mythological narrative told by Moooshum in *The Round House*, Akiikwe was set up by her husband Mirage, a trickster-like figure, who forced their son Nanapush to kill the mother. Nanapush rescued her and she taught him to sing the buffalo song. The plot echoes Joe's revenge for his mother. During the search for buffalo woman, Nanapush was sheltered in the body of the buffalo woman during a snow storm. During the spiritual communication, Nanapush was told that the round house was once the embodiment of the spiritual power of the buffalo woman. We can say ecological elements play an essential role in terms of thematic construction and writing strategy in both layers. Yet, the literary work of Louise Erdrich is not a utopian imagination, but a realistic depiction as well as reflection upon the lives in Native Americans in the reservation today. Louise Erdrich's purpose of constructing the double-layer is to create an intertextuality between traditional myth and realistic context to highlight the modern practical version of the past mythological elements.

In the description of the core image of the round house, Louise Erdrich has given a detailed account of buffalo, the patron god of the tribe. In the mythological narrative, the buffalo, as an intimate creature in the lives of the Native Americans, conveys rich symbolic meaning as the origin of life. The depiction of the buffalo in the mythological narration serves as a memoir of the glorious past and a sad reminder of their solitude today. Ecologically speaking, the animals are usually empowered by spiritual deities and maintain the life of the people in different tribes. They are also the bond connecting human beings with nature.

In *The Round House*, the old buffalo woman saved Nanapush and the whole tribe with her own body. The spiritual belief of buffalo in the traditional Native American culture constructs a Native moral system, which justifies Joe's killing of Larke for revenge. Yet, in the realistic context, the traditional Native notion of justice and spiritual force has lost power. The round house, a once holy building blessed by the old buffalo woman, plays no role to protect the mother when she was raped. And due to mother's failure to locate the exact place where the rape took place, Larke is not punished and justice cannot be achieved. The deity the round house once conveyed has become ineffective. To a larger extent, it can be said that the function of the round house is a regretful reminder of the lost of traditional Native cultural power in contemporary times. The symbol of buffalo woman has been turned from a utopian and idealistic one into a realistic one, consisting of conflicts and confrontations of varied cultures and thus deconstructs the illusion of the Native cultural entity and builds up a true "geological realism" (Cai, 2013, p. 78). As a writing strategy, the double-layer structure, on one hand, enriches the symbolic meanings of the novel, on the other hand, thematically reveals the understanding of Louise Erdrich towards the resurrection of Native American culture today and the writing strategy accordingly.

### 3. Boundary and Transgression

Different from the whites' mandatory definition of the spatial boundary, the boundary-definition

of the Native Americans is characterized by strong ecological sufficiency, emphasizing the peculiarity and self-sufficiency of nature and creatures. The native notion of boundary usually contains important metaphorical meaning, referring not only to the real geological borders, but also the power, ethnic, geopolitical, and cultural relations. It can be the geological as well as social embodiment of the relations between human beings and nature. The geological awareness can be traced back to the spatial notion in the traditional Native American culture, with the earth serving as the ecological base of the geological understanding of the Native Americans.

The boundary discussed in the present paper deals with, first of all, the sensual ability of the earth and spatial directions. During the investigation of the case in *The Round House*, the biggest obstacle is the exact location of the rape. As a lawyer himself, Bazil tries all the way to make it clear so as to make certain of the law that applies in the area.

Yet, Joe's mother cannot recall the what has happened. What makes it worse is she has lost the ability of directional perception in the space and can provide no information for the investigation, which leads to the inability of Bazil to punish Larke while he fails to make certain of the applicable law. From traditional Native ecological perspective, the individual and nature are harmonious in relation. In the Native culture with the earth as the basic ecological base, once a person loses the ability to perceive the earth and directions, his/her subjectivity will be damaged accordingly.

The destruction of subjectivity occurs not only in the individual, but also in the tribal culture. The surrounding space around the round house, as the cultural center, has been splintered and blurred. As revealed in *The Round House*, the fragility of the legal system of the whites in the preservation of justice is best shown in terms of the definition of spatial boundary.

"Here's the round house. Just behind it, you have the Smoker allotment, which is now so fractionated nobody can get much use out of it. Then a strip that was sold—free land. The round house is on the far edge of tribal trust, where our court has jurisdiction, though of course not over a white man. So federal law applies. Down to the lake, that is also tribal trust. But just to one side, a corner of that is state park, where state law applies. On the other side of that pasture, more woods, we have an extension of round house land" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 196).

As the theme frequently portrayed in Louise Erdrich's novels, the geological boundary carries with them the metaphorical meaning of segregation of geological land as well as cultural and spiritual unity of the Native Americans. Thus, the land, as a spiritual entity, is endowed with existential meaning. The splintered territory is the realistic depiction of the current Native American life which witnesses the shrinkage and marginalization of their lands. The territorial segregation and separated regional legal application triggers the confrontation in the novel and in the meanwhile portrays the dilemma of the contemporary Native American culture, i.e., the difficulty of the maintenance of the harmony and unity of the traditional Native American cultural system under the impact of white culture. From spatial perspective, the loss of personal ability in spatial location as well as the separated geological position where the round house is located are symbolic and realistic representations of the fragmented and fragile status quo of the current Native American culture. When justice cannot be achieved, the only way to find justice is to transgress, finding one's own way of preserving justice.

Proceeding from the geological boundaries of the area near the round house subject to different legal jurisdictions and extending it to the subjectivity construction both on the

individual level and tribal level, the novel exhibits Louise Erdrich's adept skill of textual construction, broad imagination as well as realistic concern, which is exhibited in the act of transgression. Through the crossing and violation of the previous boundary and corresponding space, transgression itself has strong spatial connotation. It refers to the deconstruction as well as reconstruction of the former boundary, rules and regulations. Yet, transgression is not only a simple line-crossing act. The relationship between boundary and trespass is not a simple dichotomy between white and black, regulation and taboo, interior and exterior. According to Georges Bataille, transgression conveys double meanings. It bestows the factual meaning of the existence on the boundary during its challenging behavior of transgression. "The barriers are not merely raised, for it may even be necessary at the moment of transgression to assert their solidarity. Concern over a rule is sometimes at its most acute when that rule is being broken, for it is harder to limit a disturbance already begun" (Bataille, 1986, p. 65). So, transgression is not a negation, rather it turns out to be an affirmation and highlights the legitimacy of the boundary. If we regard the boundary as the realistic restraints set by the Euro-American white culture for the contemporary Native identity, the novel, by depicting the transgression, highlights the cultural dilemma rather than portraying an idealistic trickster evasion.

Transgression can be a geological trespass, it can also be social violation of any regulations. In the novel, Joe and his parents conduct transgressions respectively. The first transgression is Joe's violation of the whites' law by shooting Larke out of traditional Native American belief in justice. In Joe's transgressing act, the mythological power derived from Nanapush has endowed Joe with heroic sense of responsibility. Although the shooting violates whites' law, Joe fancies himself as a trickster, roaming along the boundary and exempt from legal restrictions.

"For years our people have struggled to resist an unstoppable array of greedy and unstable beings. Our army has been reduced to a few desperate warriors and we are all but weaponless and starving. ...I am that soldier" (Erdrich, 2012, pp. 111-112).

Yet, according to Louise Erdrich, the Native American cultural renaissance is not a miraculous blossoming of the traditional past, and the recollection of the Native tribal glory is not a self-portrayed fantasy. Thus the characterization of Joe contains complex connotations. He has inherited Native American tradition, which is revealed through his dialogue with Mushoom via the double-layer narrative structure. Joe himself is shaped like a hero-to-be in the cultural salvation and reconstruction of contemporary Native reality. Yet, the illusive fantasy of heroic transgression is in violation of reality and cannot continue.

For Bataille, "transgression is complementary to the profane world, exceeding its limits but not destroying it. Human society is not only a world of work. Simultaneously—or successively—it is made up of the profane and the sacred, its two complementary forms. The profane world is the world of taboos. The sacred world depends on limited acts of transgression. It is the world of celebrations, sovereign rulers and God" (Bataille, 1986, pp. 67-68). There are also the profane world and sacred world in *The Round House* too, representing the realistic and idealistic worlds the Native people are experiencing and expecting respectively. After killing Larke, Joe drives with his friends, excited by the illusion of being a trickster, on a journey to freedom. The journey is a continuation of the personal illusion of individualistic heroism fighting against taboos in the profane world. Yet, the pioneering exploration ended in an accident, symbolizing the failure of the first "heroic" transgression. What readers acquire during the observation of



Joe's growth is a grey picture of the past glory of the traditional Native American culture.

After being awake, Joe begins a new transgression with his parents when driving across the state boundary. It can be said that the two transgressions are efforts of construction of cultural subjectivity, made by Joe and his parents respectively. While the second transgression challenges the white definition of the Native history, it can be viewed as a continuation of the first one. It also denies the first one. Rather than being a challenging confrontation against the first one, the second transgression is in line with Bataille's definition of transgression as a confirmation of the border it transgresses and views the confrontations from a more realistic perspective.

As for the future, Bazil's expectation is quite rational and objective, "We are trying to build a solid base here for our sovereignty. We try to press against the boundaries of what we are allowed, walk a step past the edge. Our records will be scrutinized by Congress one day and decisions on whether to enlarge our jurisdiction will be made. Some day. We want the right to prosecute criminals of all races on all lands within our original boundaries" (Erdrich, 2012, pp. 229-230). Thus it can be said that as a objective reflection of the contemporary Native American culture, the second transgression forms the thematic meaning of the novel. In the end of the novel, the second transgression is tinged with realistic color of grey. "In all those miles, in all those hours, in all that air rushing by and sky coming at us, blending into the next horizon, then the one after that, in all that time there was nothing to be said...But we did not stop this time. We passed over in a sweep of sorrow that would persist into our small forever. We just kept going" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 317).

If space is viewed as an active sphere which witnesses power struggles, different regions defined by various powers can be viewed as metaphorical entities of their existence. The significance of the exploration on the spatial analysis of transgression lies in the revelation of power relations within. In the novel, Louise Erdrich uses spatial transgression to exhibit the preservation of traditional Native American belief of justice, which exhibits the objective and rational style of Louise Erdrich's writing strategy. It is a grand notion about the Native American cultural resurrection today. To be more specific, it poses the question of how to preserve and maintain the ethnic and cultural features in the multi-cultural society where political, economic, and legal elements interact with each other. From this perspective, the second transgression in the novel, by discarding the traditional Native "return" matrix, conveys a more practical meaning.

Proceeding from the thematic exploration of preserving justice, *The Round House* combines ideal and realistic style in the discussion of both the rape case on the micro level and the way of reconstruction of Native American ethnicity under the influence of western modernity on the macro level. In the multicultural setting which has witnessed the marginalization of the Native American culture, the crisis Native Americans are facing is not limited to Native traditional notion of balance between human beings and nature. It has broken through the pure ecological sphere and been interwoven into the political and social arena, which has also featured Louise Erdrich's realistic style. According to Hans Bak, "Erdrich's realism is a peculiarly hybrid mode, one fluid and flexible enough to accommodate both elements from tribal lore and an awareness of dilemmas besetting the writer in postmodernist times. It is the injection of tribal elements—shamanism, spirits, witchcraft, charms, love medicines—together with the use of non-Western

concepts of space and time which help to account for the vaunted ‘magic’ of her realism” (Bak, 1992, pp. 148-149). As one of the pioneering figures among contemporary Native American writers, Louise Erdrich tries to depict the confrontation, absorption and hybridization of various cultural elements which helps to shape the modern Native American subjectivity. Through spatial transgression, Louise Erdrich breaks the illusion of the renaissance of traditional Native American culture. She preserves the Native tradition with mythological and ecological elements and, in the meanwhile, records the current existential state of the Native American people, trying to explore the reconstruction of the Native American entity in the current cultural and social context in her realistic manner. The legal matter discussed in *The Round House* is only one perspective to observe the contemporary identity. Yet, it has revealed an essential matter in the reconstruction of Native American subjectivity in the context of modernity. On one hand, the strong and rich tradition of the Native American culture is the base which should be relied on; while on the other hand, what remains to be explored is the identity reconstruction of the Native American culture in the present multi-cultural context. In *The Round House*, Louise Erdrich uses rich Native ecological and mythological elements, together with her realistic manner, to exhibit her idea of this key issue, i.e., the key matter in the reconstruction of the contemporary Native American subjectivity should be derived from both the original Native American tradition and the confirmation from its confrontation against the white culture.

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