

The Anishinaabe Worldview and the Child Reader in Louise Erdrich's
The Birchbark House Series

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Louise Erdrich is an award-winning Anishinaabe-American author, whose works of fiction have attracted a significant body of scholarly interest. To date, her output of children's fiction has received comparatively less critical attention. This thesis is the first study to consider *The Birchbark House* series (published between 1999 and 2016) as a whole unit, in order to demonstrate its importance as a contributor to the perpetuation of Anishinaabe values amongst both Indigenous and settler children, and as a counter-hegemonic narrative.

This thesis takes as its starting point the development of children's literature as a field of scholarly enquiry, using existing theoretical frameworks to situate *The Birchbark House* series within the discourse surrounding children's and young adult literature. The thesis then traces the Anishinaabe worldview through the novels by considering key themes that emerge from Anishinaabe and Native studies as markers of Indigenous culture.

The contribution to knowledge of this thesis lies in drawing together the critical fields of Native Studies and Children's Literature. By examining *The Birchbark House* series through the themes of land/environment, home, family, and storytelling, this thesis demonstrates the ways in which Erdrich privileges an Anishinaabe worldview, and in doing so shows how Erdrich's children's fiction interacts with and belongs to her wider body of work.

The key findings of this thesis relate to the child reader and the development of indigenous methodologies. Erdrich's novels are central to the rapid growth of Anishinaabe-authored children's and young adult literature, and embedded within a wider cultural renaissance which is contributing to growing activism and widespread awareness of Indigenous cultural and political issues. This in turn warrants a reassessment of the methodologies underpinning the critical study of emerging Indigenous children's literature, building on the existing development of decolonising and indigenous methodologies within Anishinaabe studies.

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Louise Erdrich's books for children, *The Birchbark House* (1999) and its sequels, trace the life of an Ojibwe¹ family from their ancestral home on Madeline Island in Lake Superior, to the Plains, and eventually, the Turtle Mountain reservation. Over the course of the series, the protagonists undergo a series of migrations that echo those made by the Ojibwe in the nineteenth century, from the perspective of eight-year-old Omakayas, and in the later novels, her young sons. This thesis explores the novels' foregrounding of the Anishinaabe worldview as an act of presencing against contemporary and historical colonial definitions of Native American identity and culture.² By addressing the texts' engagement with aspects of Anishinaabe life such as land, family, the home, and storytelling, this thesis identifies and traces the development of the Anishinaabe concept of *mino-bimaadiziwin*³, or 'the good life', within the series. This, in turn, enables us to read the novels as a narrative that not only counters Euro-American accounts of white settlement but functions more as an act of cultural presencing than historical revision. This introduction will first situate the series at the interstices of Native Studies and Children's Literature, then consider the background of the author and the novels' place within her literary oeuvre. The introduction then explores a range

¹ This thesis recognises that there are variations in the terminology used to describe the tribe to which the characters of the novels, and Erdrich herself, belongs. Namely, these are Ojibwe, Anishinaabe, and Chippewa, and each term has its own political and cultural meaning and significance. In this study I use the terms Ojibwe and Anishinaabe depending on context, which follows a pattern set by Erdrich in the novels. Ojibwe is the designation used by Erdrich in the preface to her novels. However, she too uses Anishinaabe to describe the wider tribal group and Omakayas' cultural heritage. The terms each have variations in spelling, so for clarity I have endeavoured to use 'Ojibwe' and 'Anishinaabe' consistently.

² I use the term presencing to refer to the assertion of Indigenous cultural and literary existence, following Daniel Heath Justice's suggestion that stories are actively part of 'cultural, political and familial resurgence.' See Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018) pp. 5-6.

³ *Mino-bimaadiziwin* is 'the good life', or a 'long and happy life', which is achieved by upholding Anishinaabe values and relationships. The term is explained more in context in later chapters.

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of significant studies in the fields of Anishinaabe Studies and Children's Literature in order to develop an understanding of the novels as indigenous children's literature.⁴

The intersection of Native studies and children's literature has been a productive site of engagement with the texts throughout this thesis. Thinking about the role of children's literature in identity development and cultural awareness facilitates an understanding of Erdrich's narratives that position the texts as crucial to the survivance of Anishinaabe culture. The term 'survance' – a portmanteau of survival and resistance – was coined by Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor, and is described as "the unique history of survival and resistance that sustained indigenous creativity within their communities."⁵ Erdrich's children's fiction has been described by Heid E. Erdrich as: "story as persistence and resistance, a postcolonial response as well as a tradition,"⁶ where the presence of a child reader complicates the idea of a direct postcolonial response in favour of celebrating persistence. For readers that are aware of the history of colonialism and conquest the novels are a form of response to the dominant historical narrative. For other readers, this series may sit alongside other texts about Native Americans that form a more nuanced understanding of Native history, thus not functioning as a response but rather as evidence of survivance. As a result of the variation in knowledge and experience that readers have, the novels speak on multiple levels to a varied audience, written with both Anishinaabe and non-Native readers in mind. By choosing to write these stories as children's fiction, Erdrich is able to draw on aspects of childhood that are universal, as well as

⁴ I use the term indigenous/Indigenous to refer to the cultural systems and people groups that existed on Turtle Island/North America prior to European exploration and settlement. I predominantly use the term 'Native American' to refer to the indigenous peoples of the United States, unless they have self-identified using a different term.

⁵ Brenda J Child, *Holding Our World Together: Ojibwe Women and the Survival of Community*, (New York: Viking, 2012), p. xxvii.

⁶ Heid E. Erdrich, 'Literary Ancestry as Presence', in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World Through Stories*, ed. by Jill Doerfler et al, (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2013), pp. 13-34 (p. 19).

those that are culturally specific to an Anishinaabe child. In the interstices between the two, Erdrich negotiates a storytelling position that is faithful to Anishinaabe customs whilst reflecting her own mixed heritage. The historian David Lewis writes: "Indian persistence depends on educating young people in their own language and customs"⁷ and these novels fit within a broader tradition of resurgence (by which I mean an increase in both quantity and scope of publications) in children's and young adult literature. As the field of children's literature has developed, there has been an increase in Native American authors writing for that audience, such as Joseph Bruchac, Sherman Alexie, Cynthia Leitich-Smith, Carter Meland, and of course, Louise Erdrich.

Louise Erdrich was born in Little Falls, Minnesota to a German-American father, and an Ojibwe mother. She grew up in Wahpeton, North Dakota, where her parents were teachers at the Wahpeton Indian Boarding School, and she and her siblings were raised in the Catholic church. Her maternal grandfather, Patrick Gourneau, was tribal chair of the Turtle Mountain band of Chippewa. Erdrich's storytelling began in her childhood, when her father would pay her five cents for each story she wrote. She went on to study English and Creative Writing at Dartmouth, where she met her husband and collaborator Michael Dorris, and she later completed a Master of Arts in Creative Writing at Johns Hopkins.⁸

Her output as a writer of poetry, fiction, non-fiction and essays has garnered significant critical attention. She is the two-time recipient of the National Book Critics Circle Award (For *Love Medicine*, in 1984 and *LaRose* in 2017); the National Book Award for Fiction (*The Round*

⁷ David Rich Lewis, 'The Significance of Native Americans in the History of the Twentieth-Century American West', *Western Historical Quarterly* 24.2 (May 1993), 203-227, (p. 207).

⁸ For further biographical detail, see: Catherine Rainwater, 'Louise Erdrich's Storied Universe,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* ed. by Joy Porter and Kenneth M. Roemer, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 271-282, and Allan Chavkin and Nancy Feyl Chavkin, eds., *Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris* (Jackson, MS: Mississippi University Press, 1994).

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House, 2012) and the American Book Award (*Love Medicine*, 1985), amongst others. Her literary career, now in its fourth decade, was recognised in 2014 by the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction. Her children's fiction has been similarly well-received, with the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction awarded to *Chickadee* (2012), and *The Game of Silence* (2006).

Her children's writing also includes the picture-books *Grandmother's Pigeon* (1996) and *The Range Eternal* (2002), which adopt similar themes to *The Birchbark House* series. In *Grandmother's Pigeon*, a young family discover a hatching nest of previously extinct messenger pigeons one year after Grandmother departs for Greenland on the back of a porpoise. A short time after secretly releasing the pigeons to protect them from scientific interest, the family receives a letter from Grandma thanking them for their pigeon messages. *The Range Eternal* tells the story of a beloved family stove that provided the heart and hearth of a home in the Turtle Mountains – offering protection from the Windigo spirit, keeping the family warm, and telling the story of the range in the shadows of the flames. These stories connect the themes of home, family and nature to Anishinaabe culture in various contexts.

Inevitably, her work has also attracted a great deal of attention from literary critics. Within Native American Studies, her work has been listed alongside other writers of what many consider the 'second wave' of the Native American literary renaissance, such as Thomas King and Sherman Alexie. Scholarly work to date includes single-author studies by Allan Chavkin (1999), David Stirrup (2010), and Seema Kurup (2016). There is a substantial range of articles devoted mainly to her adult novels, and increasingly attention is being focused on the *Birchbark House* series. This thesis, then, is situated within a burgeoning field of Erdrich scholarship, but is unique in its focus on the meeting point between Native Studies and Children's Literature, and is the first single-author study of Erdrich devoted to her children's

fiction. The themes that occupy her adult novels – “Family and motherhood, storytelling, healing, environmental issues, and historical consciousness”¹⁰ – remain central to her children’s fiction, in a different context, and in a way that asserts a pedagogical as well as literary responsibility in telling the story of Omakayas.

The Birchbark House Series

That story begins in the prologue of the first novel with the discovery, by voyageurs, of an infant survivor of a smallpox epidemic on Spirit Island. Too fearful of the disease to rescue the child, one of the traders, named Hat, resolves to inform his wife – a woman named Tallow – who we learn is “afraid of nothing.”¹¹ The novel then skips forward eight years, and we meet Omakayas again as a child, learning to build the birchbark house of the title with her grandmother, Nokomis. The first two novels are structured around the seasons, echoing the family’s observance of the seasonal round, the practice of moving according to hunting patterns. The breakdown of this structure from the third book onwards reflects the changing way of life for the Anishinaabe and this is explored in more detail in later chapters.

There are two main plot strands to the stories: Omakayas’ bildungsroman is the primary plot, and the reader learns about life as an Anishinaabe from her perspective. This includes chores, her relationship with her siblings, her spiritual development, and her relationship to the environment and an assortment of creatures – not least the bear, which Erdrich uses to subtly educate the reader in the Anishinabe clan system. The sub-plot drives the action of the novels, with the gradual revelation of the long-term threat posed by white settlers being

¹⁰ Catherine Rainwater, ‘Louise Erdrich’s Storied Universe’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* ed. by Joy Porter and Kenneth M. Roemer, pp. 271-282, (p. 271).

¹¹ Louise Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, (New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1999, repr. 2002), p. 2.

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foreshadowed by events that impact daily life in the present, such as a smallpox epidemic brought by a visitor, and the Catholic mission school where Omakayas' sister learns to write. Erdrich uses points of contact such as trading posts and the mission school to draw attention to significant aspects of Anishinaabe culture and history, and the differences and similarities between Ojibwe and settler. The mission school, for instance, is approached with caution by Omakayas, mindful of her grandmother's warning not to forget her Anishinaabe ways. The threat of assimilation and forgetting is presented next to an encounter with Fishtail, an Ojibwe relative, who is learning to read and write so that "they can't cheat us with the treaties."¹² For Fishtail, therefore, the mission school represents an opportunity to use education to protect the tribe. Nokomis, upon seeing the 'tracks', declares: "Howah! That's a good idea! Like our picture writing,"¹³ placing reading and writing in English in the context of Anishinaabe modes of communication which existed prior to contact.

The novels' arrangement around the seasons further develops the interplay between settler and Ojibwe society. Deydey's winter cabin, which is built near to the town, is described as one of only two 'chimookoman' (white) things in which Omakayas' father takes pride – the other being his ability to play chess – and it is in the winter cabin that most of the traditional teaching stories are told. In the winter, when food is scarce, Erdrich blends Ojibwe and settler methods of getting food. Deydey, using his skills at chess, is able to win supplies with the trader, and Nokomis dreams the location of a buck that provides meat for the family on the edge of starvation. Omakayas' story is brought together in a chapter entitled 'Full Circle', in which she learns about her origins on Spirit Island and understands why she survived the smallpox epidemic when others didn't. Her grief at the loss of her baby brother, combined with an

¹² Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, p. 112.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 190.

encounter with bear cubs, leads her to seek out the knowledge that will make her a healer, and she is taught by her grandmother where to find medicines and how to use them. Ultimately, though, it is Omakayas' connection to the spirit world that she finds in nature which enables her to grieve to heal.

In the second book, *The Game of Silence* (2005), the novel's title comes from the game that is played to keep children quiet whilst adults talk, often involving prizes for the quietest child at the end of the game. The introduction of the game signifies the increased threat to the family's way of life, made apparent in the first chapter with the arrival of a band of Anishinaabe, referred to as the 'raggedy ones' on the shore of Madeline Island. Driven into the territory of another tribe, the Bwaanag, by settlers, their village had been ravaged and they fled. The family is enlarged by adoption, and new cousins and friends increase Omakayas' social circle. The seasonal activities continue, and the development of Ojibwe-settler relations is apparent on different levels. For Omakayas, friendship with a white girl creates a cultural exchange, in which the two communicate by signs and learn about each other's culture. For her father, the 'black robe' (priest) is a 'soul stealer' – offering to help them write in their own language, if they agree to be baptised, and later he and the priest are saved by Omakayas' dream that accurately locates them when they are stranded. For other men in the tribe, the betrayal at Sandy Lake, where promised land payments and food never materialised, caused many to die of starvation and weakness. The novel ends with the family beginning their journey away from their ancestral and spiritual island, in search of a new home.

The Porcupine Year (2008) is the final novel that is focalised through Omakayas, and it breaks away from the former organisation of chapters around the seasons to reflect the separation of the family from their traditional hunting grounds. The family travel west, encountering the rival tribe, the Bwaanag, that had caused destruction to those who joined

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them in *The Game of Silence*. The family face raids, theft and starvation, but there are marked developments in Omakayas' personal life that provide balance to the sorrow and danger. In this novel, Omakayas receives a name – Ojimabinesikwe, Leading Thunderbird Woman – reaches physical maturity, experiences the 'woman's lodge' ceremony, and is courted by Animikiins. The family are reunited with cousins, but mourn for Old Tallow who is killed in pursuit of a bear. The novel is also significant for the development of Omakayas' brother Pinch, who adopts the name Quill after the eponymous porcupine that becomes his much-loved pet. Described in the text as a year of "danger and love, sacrifice and surprise,"¹⁴ the novel focuses less on the relationship between settlers and Ojibwe, and more on the interplay between neighbouring tribes and the development of fellowship between the Ojibwe and Dakota. As a result, the narrative shifts away from telling the story of Omakayas' life in relation to colonisation, although this certainly precipitates much of the initial action. Instead, it is in this novel that plot development is centred more clearly around Anishinaabe customs and the attempt to maintain connections to the land and to each other when faced with unfamiliar terrain, threats and uncertainty.

The final two novels of the series as it exists at the time of writing are *Chickadee* (2012) and *Makoons* (2016), named respectively for Omakayas' twin sons. Whereas the first three novels cover the period from 1847 to 1852, *Chickadee* is set fourteen years later, in 1866. Following the earlier migration from Madeline Island, the family now live in a "remote land" away from the "illnesses that the fur traders brought along with bright cloth and wonderful tools."¹⁵ The novel alludes to the Anishinaabe belief that twins were sacred, blessed: "Omakayas [remembered] what Nokomis had said about how the world was created by twin

¹⁴ Louise Erdrich, *The Porcupine Year*, (New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 2008), p. 182.

¹⁵ Louise Erdrich, *Chickadee*, (New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 2012), p. xi.

brothers"¹⁶ and it is that bond, described as the "invisible strings of life,"¹⁷ that is tested when the main action of the narrative – the abduction of Chickadee – occurs. *Chickadee* picks up some of the same thematic threads as the first novel, with a particular focus on the depressive illness suffered by Makoons in the absence of his twin, and the healing song of the chickadee bird that saves the life of Chickadee as he attempts to find his way home. The novel also features another significant move in the life of Omakayas' family, from the woods out onto the open plains, where the family set up home in a cabin while they search and wait for Chickadee's return. The novel develops Ojibwe-settler relations with the introduction of Metis characters, and through the interaction between the family and the Catholic church, whose priests continued to help the Ojibwe (and tried to convert them).

The narrative of *Makoons* picks up almost immediately after the twins are reunited at the end of *Chickadee*, with a prophetic dream. Makoons, whose name means 'little bear', has dreamed that he will recover from his illness; that they will be strong, hunt buffalo, and keep horses. The dream also foreshadows an unknown threat to the family, as Makoons laments, "we cannot save them all."¹⁸ The novel foregrounds the huge changes wrought on the family's way of life, opening with a comparison between Dakota territory, which "still belonged to the buffalo, the hunters [...] the wolves and the eagles" with their former home, now the state of Minnesota, in which the Ojibwe were being forced to live on reservations, or what the elders call "ishoniganan, or leftovers."¹⁹ Thematically, this book focuses on environmental destruction as the buffalo hunt is the lynchpin around which the story is built. The hunt is being threatened by settlers, whose encroachment further west is driving the buffalo away, but in spite of this

¹⁶ Erdrich, *Chickadee*, p. 4.

¹⁷ Louise Erdrich, *Makoons*, (New York: Harper, 2016), p. 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 5-6.

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Erdrich continues to resist an 'us and them' dichotomy. A discussion about who the enemies were suggests it is the person's behaviour, not cultural identity, that makes them bad: "There are good or bad Sioux, good or bad white people, good or bad Michif people."²⁰ The twins echo Omakayas' childhood affinity for animals with their adoption of a buffalo calf, which they protect during hunts. Family and kin networks are an important focus of this novel, too, particularly regarding redemption, as one tribal member begins as an arrogant hunter, cast out for his risky behaviour in hunts, and becomes a redeemed man who saved the life of Omakayas' niece. The novel culminates in another move, this time to the Turtle Mountains, which eventually became the home reservation of Erdrich's mother. As a narrative of family history, the incursion of small biographical details into the accompanying maps hint that the move undertaken in *Makoons* is the final one, though further novels are expected to eventually span one hundred years of Ojibwe history.

Theoretical Approaches: Anishinaabe Studies

Within recent scholarship in Native studies there have been a range of publications focused on tribally-specific culture, history and literature which have been invaluable to this study, concerned as it is with the way in which the novels present an Anishinaabe worldview. The thematic approach of this thesis was developed through close reading of the primary texts and supported by Anishinaabe scholarship which has in turn informed the development of my chapters, through examination of the recurring themes in current research.

Emerging from Anishinaabe scholarship are two distinct but connected themes: storytelling, and *mino-bimaadiziwin* (the good life). The former is recognised within this thesis

²⁰ Erdrich, *Makoons*, p. 87.

by the incorporation of a chapter that explores the role of embedded storytelling within the *Birchbark House* narrative. Mino-bimaadiziwin is somewhat less tangible, though the subjects under consideration in this thesis – land and environment, the home, the family – go some way to showing how the novels are imbued with the principles of the Anishinaabe 'good life'.

The centrality of stories is the focus of *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World Through Stories* (2013). This collection of essays is described in its introduction as “a community of voices [...] [that] not only comes out of a long Anishinaabe tradition of storytelling, but it is also part of a larger conversation across Anishinaabeg geographies, histories, and communities.”⁴² The dialogic approach to the role of storytelling is embodied within the introduction by the inclusion of a transcript of a conversation between the editors, recording their ambitions for the collection. Story also influences the preface, written by John Borrows as a version of the Anishinaabe creation story, 'Nanaboozhoo and the Flood'. The preface itself reflects the power of story and its place within Anishinaabe culture by showing how traditional stories can be adapted, are shared, and have the power to create. Stories are also described as a unifying force, whilst acknowledging a range of opinions within Anishinaabe studies about story: “Stories imagine, construct, and unify communities, but they can also deconstruct, destroy, and divide them.” This refers to David Treuer's argument that finding culture within stories “ossifies that culture” by fixing them in literary representation, whereas I and other critics argue that stories are a valuable means of transmitting cultural values in order to protect and advance the culture for future generations.⁴³ Treuer makes an important distinction, which I return to in chapter five, between sacred tribal stories and commercial

⁴² Jill Doerfler, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, eds, *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World through Stories* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2013), p. xix.

⁴³ *Ibid*, pp. xvii, xix.

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fiction. The commodification of fiction and its openness to interpretation — the vulnerability of the novel — is in Treuer’s analysis, a greater danger to Indian fiction because of the “compounding silence” of Indians in real life and the “ubiquitous presence Indians have in the American literary and mythic landscape.”⁴⁴ This concern in itself speaks of the potential for fiction to shape and mediate culture, and the vitality of tribally-specific work like Erdrich’s to close the gap between the silence of indigenous voices and the popular, settler-created images of Indians in American culture. At the same time, works of fiction are limited by their openness and the danger of specific cultural or sacred stories being misinterpreted and misapplied, or used to further commodified images of Indians. In a Native context, however, the openness of interpretation is key to the pedagogical function of stories.

Of particular interest to this thesis is the argument that stories are a way of giving young people a sense of belonging to, and understanding of, their culture. Niigaan James Sinclair refers to studies which have shown a connection between being exposed to Anishinaabeg language and literature and gaining pride in their cultural inheritances which develops resilience and self-worth.⁴⁵ The pedagogical aspect of story, often associated with children’s literature is examined by Thomas Peacock. He explains: “How to conduct oneself, what constituted acceptable character, the attributes of acceptable behaviour and quality were all contained in story meanings [...] Young and old alike learned according to their cognitive ability and developmental level.”⁴⁶ Peacock explains that there is no imposed meaning, with listeners free to interpret the story individually. This feature of storytelling as pedagogy is developed by Anishinaabe scholar Lawrence Gross in his book, *Anshinaabe Ways of Knowing and Being* (2016). Gross explains that within the context of a culture that values ‘respectful individualism’

⁴⁴ David Treuer, *Native American Fiction: A User’s Manual*, (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2006), p. 22

⁴⁵ Doerfler et al., *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies*, p. xxv.

⁴⁶ Thomas Peacock, ‘Teaching as Story’, in Doerfler et.al, *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies*, pp. 103-115, p. 105.

– that is, the idea that no-one can enforce a view on anyone else, and that everyone has “something to offer to the community” – storytelling is a method to convey lessons and warnings indirectly.⁴⁷ Regarding child development, Gross compares stories to food:

The stories that are fed a child will help shape the way he or she sees the world in any countless number of ways. For example, stories have an impact on how children see themselves [...] in the case of the Anishinaabeg, they shape how children will see the natural world. We think about healthy food for a healthy body. We can also think about healthy stories for a healthy mind.⁴⁸

According to Gross, stories are an integral part of forming a person's worldview and in particular for the Anishinaabe, the way in which children learn to live as Anishinaabe people.

In the *Birchbark House* series, embedded stories are used to illuminate the events of the main narrative. They are by turns didactic, entertaining, reports, warnings, and testimony, and often a combination of these. The result is that the stories become a significant part of Anishinaabe life as Erdrich portrays it, and evidently formative in Omakayas' development. Stories also have a wider function for the Anishinaabe within and without the *Birchbark House* narrative, and that is in their connection to the land. Jim Northrup, another prominent Anishinaabe author, argues that “part of cultural continuity [...] is knowing the history and stories of the land.”⁴⁹ The connection between stories and land is explored in Erdrich's non-fiction book, *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (2003), in which she takes her infant daughter Kiizhikok to a series of islands in Lake of the Woods and Rainy Lake, along the U.S-Canada border. On the trip, she finds rock paintings, an indelible imprint of story on landscape, at

⁴⁷ Lawrence W. Gross, *Anishinaabe Ways of Knowing and Being*, (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 159.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 159.

⁴⁹ Margaret Noodin, *Bawaajimo: A Dialect of Dreams in Anishinaabe Language and Literature*, (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2014), p. 99.

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which offerings are placed as a sign that the paintings are “alive and still respected by the Anishinaabeg.”⁵⁰ Again this is an example of stories as living entities, as Gross describes, “[stories] are alive and functioning in everyday life. This helps promote a feeling of love and connection with the land, and helps make the Anishinaabeg fierce defenders of the earth.”⁵¹ Throughout Erdrich’s novels Omakayas learns to harvest maple sugar, manoomin (wild rice), and birchbark for building, as well as hunting small animals, tanning hides, preparing meat and growing vegetables. She learns how to live in accordance with her environment, learning bimaadiziwin which “teaches the necessity of respecting all life, from the smallest insects upwards.”⁵² Connecting the land and storytelling are the seasons, with each aspect of harvest and each type of story connected to a particular time of year. Linda LeGarde Grover describes winter as: “the season for traditional Ojibwe storytelling. The Ojibwe [...] keep and care for stories, telling and passing them down when the time is determined by the storyteller/keeper as appropriate.”⁵³ Stories, according to Grover, are not only connected to the time of year, but are connections between generations of storytellers and keepers. As I have already shown, this seasonal, cyclical foundation of Anishinaabe life frames the first novels of the series.

Another important focus of the series, and of Anishinaabe scholarship, is family. Family, or kinship, by which I mean the relationships between both blood (biological) and non-biological relatives within the stories, underpins an understanding both of the Anishinaabe worldview and of the series as children’s literature. The role of the family as a trope within children’s literature has been widely studied, and continues to influence scholars who seek to

⁵⁰ Louise Erdrich, *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (Washington: National Geographic Society, 2003), p. 66.

⁵¹ Gross, *Anishinaabe Ways*, p. 160.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 207.

⁵³ Linda LeGarde Grover, *Onigamiising: Seasons of an Ojibwe Year*, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2017), p. 148.

show that children's literature both reflects and informs cultural norms and values.⁵⁴ In American children's fiction, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) has been described by Nikki Gamble as "the birth of the American family novel" and credits the absence of "direct patriarchal influence" within the text as a means to focus on female relationships, and the development of the young women in the family.⁵⁵

The *Birchbark House* series is in many ways, a 'family fiction,' whose focus is the daily life of one Anishinaabe family in the nineteenth century. The narrative offers the reader an insight into the activities and relationships that shape Omakayas' life, and so reflect the ingenuity, organisation, and cultural knowledge that is passed from one generation to the next. Significantly for this series, the role of women in society differed greatly between the Anishinaabe and settler societies, and chapter four of this thesis is concerned specifically with how gender roles and expectations are explored in the novels. Women hold significant positions of authority in Anishinaabe culture, including holding land rights, and are widely acknowledged in scholarship as "carriers of culture" and "bearers of cultural memory."⁵⁶ Women are at the forefront of many activist movements, including Idle No More (which has been ongoing since 2012), and the Dakota Access Pipeline Protest (2016) that seek to protect sacred indigenous sites.

Brenda Child, in her book *Holding Our World Together: Ojibwe Women and the Survival of Community* (2012), writes of the expectations placed on young Ojibwe women: "Ojibwe society [...] required a great deal of their young women, who would, in a few short years, fulfil

⁵⁴ Amongst others, see Nicholas Tucker and Nikki Gamble, *Family Fictions: Anne Fine, Morris Gleitzman, Jacqueline Wilson and others*, (London: Continuum, 2001) and Ann Alston, *The Family in English Children's Literature* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

⁵⁵ Tucker and Gamble, *Family Fictions*, p. 11.

⁵⁶ Tasoulla Hadjiyanni and Kristin Helle, 'Re/Claiming the past – constructing Ojibwe identity in Minnesota homes', *Design Studies* 30 (2009), 462-481, (p. 477).

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an adult role with considerable family and community responsibility.”⁵⁷ This reflects the nature of childhood for Ojibwe children, which was a time of preparation for adulthood, as Carol Hand explains: “Ojibwe child rearing and educational practices were ideally suited for the dual task of assuring competent, self-confident individuals while at the same time promoting a strong sense of interdependence and mutual responsibility.”⁵⁸ This is evident in the novels, through the division of labour into chores which the children were expected to participate in from a young age. Omakayas helps to make the birchbark house, tan animal hides, plant, harvest, and prepare food, and take care of younger siblings. The atmosphere in which the work is carried out is one of mutual cooperation, but also learning to obey – there are many examples of Omakayas wishing she didn’t have to carry out the work she is given. A large part of an Ojibwe girl’s childhood is in apprenticeship to older women, where they spend time “mastering the skills necessary for family survival and prosperity.”⁵⁹ For Omakayas, this is mainly achieved through the mentorship of her grandmother, Nokomis, and Old Tallow.

Elders play an important role in Anishinaabe children’s development and education, and this is exemplified in *The Birchbark House* by the relationship between Omakayas and Nokomis. In particular, the teaching of medicines and healing emphasises the intimate connection to and reliance upon the land. Systems of hunting, planting and gathering sustained Ojibwe communities in ways that were unrecognised by white settlers and the American government. Child describes the ways in which “Indigenous agricultural practices were denigrated because women were the main farmers in nations like the Cherokee and others [...] which upset European and American sensibilities of the proper sexual division of labor.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Child, *Holding Our World Together*, p. 6.

⁵⁸ Carol A. Hand, ‘An Ojibwe perspective on the welfare of children: Lessons of the past and visions for the future’, *Children and Youth Services Review* 28 (2006), 20-46, (p. 24).

⁵⁹ Child, *Holding Our World Together*, p. 3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 22.

Erdrich's narrative portrays a world in which girls are raised to participate fully in a matriarchal system, in which all individuals are valued for their contribution. The childhood period, for Omakayas, is a time of intense learning and apprenticeship, which unsettles Euro-American ideas of childhood – again exemplified through the few intersections between Native and white culture within the novel. Although this thesis gives consideration to children's literature theory and aligns itself with the themes familiar to much children's literature, this study is interested in the specifically Anishinaabe childhood that emerges from a close examination of those shared themes within the novels.

An example of this is in the area of language learning. Children's literature has long been a primary means by which children are introduced to language, and the *Birchbark House* series is no exception. Throughout the texts, Erdrich includes untranslated words in Anishinaabemowin,⁶¹ the Ojibwe language, whose pronunciation and meanings are presented in a glossary. The words within the text are single words that are generally explained either by a direct translation within the text, or the context of the chapter. The untranslated words reflect the pattern of language acquisition by children, including names, items of everyday use such as 'makak' (bowl), and the weather, or seasons. The first untranslated word in *The Birchbark House* is 'makazins' (footwear). The next two occurrences of Anishinaabemowin are translated by having the phrase repeated in English immediately after:

"Booni!" Nokomis scolded. "Leave it alone!"
"Geget," said Nokomis. "Surely."

A later instance is translated by context:

⁶¹ Anishinaabemowin is the language of the Anishinaabe nation, also referred to as the Ojibwe language. See <<http://anishinaabemodaa.com/lessons>> for more information about the language and the collaborative revitalisation effort.

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As it grew dark, the family ate makuks of moose stew and fresh greens and berries, licked their fingers and bowls clean...⁶²

In these phrases the words are contextualised in such a way that the reader does not need to refer constantly to the glossary, and so disrupt the flow of reading. Rather, the words are absorbed into the lexicon of the novel. As the series is considered throughout this thesis to be a way in to understanding a specifically Anishinaabe worldview, the language used is key to viewing the series as an act of presencing. One of the ways in which assimilationists sought to undermine Native American identity was through the outlawing of indigenous languages, including Anishinaabemowin.⁶³ For this reason, the inclusion of indigenous language within the text is significant as it introduces common words and phrases to the reader that may be easily understood and even adopted, and in this way can be seen as a form of language teaching and preservation. For the same reason, however, David Treuer argues against the use of what he calls 'lexical nuggets' in Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine*, because, he argues, the "Ojibwe functions as as an ornament...a museum piece."⁶⁴ I argue that the difference lies in the designation of the *Birchbark House* series as children's fiction, where the simplicity of language serves a pedagogic function beyond its use as a cultural sign.

Both David Treuer and David Stirrup warn against mistaking 'fiction for culture'⁶⁵ and while this thesis engages primarily with the series *as an expression of* Anishinaabe culture, I am aware of the dangers of reading the series as a definitive embodiment of that culture, and that is certainly not my intention. Rather, I believe that they offer an imaginative engagement with Anishinaabe history and culture, which prioritises language and stories as the means by which

⁶² *The Birchbark House*, pp. 7, 12.

⁶³ Margaret Noodin, *Bawaajimo*, p. 55.

⁶⁴ Treuer, *Native American Fiction*, pp. 61-62.

⁶⁵ David Stirrup, *Louise Erdrich*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010) p. 192.

children learn about the world around them. Writing indigenous histories and stories in English is described by Elizabeth Archuleta, who argues:

We need to challenge the belief that we are 'less than Indian' if we speak or write in English. Rather, we should see this charge as a strategy of domination, a method to silence voices that might question or resist the status quo in Indigenous or non-Indigenous communities [...] acquiring Western knowledge or speaking English does not mean we have become assimilated.⁶⁶

The challenge surrounding language, then, is twofold: using indigenous languages faithfully in such a way that is not reductive, whilst writing predominantly in English because that is the language available to many writers of indigenous heritage. Further single-language and bilingual texts for children, in Anishinaabemowin and other Native languages, are being published, such as the Ojibwe-language children's books published by Wiigwaas Press in Minnesota, and offer a degree of bridging this gap between representation and assimilation.

Theoretical Approaches: Children's Literature

The development of children's literature as a distinct form of writing and as a field of academic study is well represented in scholarly work. The challenge for this thesis has been to reconcile what are primarily Western modes of thought in literary theory with a reading of children's literature which is distinctly Anishinaabe. The confluence of Anishinaabe studies and children's literature is an underexplored area of research, and it is significant due to the growing number of Native-authored children's texts in the U.S and Canada. I argue that this requires a critical approach that honours the development of children's literature as a field of critical study whilst opening up the possibilities of a new indigenous methodology for children's

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Archuleta, "'I Give You Back': Indigenous Women Writing to Survive", *Studies in American Indian Literatures (SAIL)*, Series 2, 18.4, (2006), 88-114, p. 90.

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literature. This thesis aims to begin that process by looking at the meeting points and divergences between current theory in children's fiction and Native studies. At the heart of this challenge is the struggle to define childhood; as the history of children's literature shows, the style and form of literature changes according to ideas about childhood. The first chapter of this thesis contextualises the novels within the field of children's literature, drawing on Perry Nodelman's seminal work on defining children's fiction and exploring the backdrop of negative historical representations that form part of the collective cultural psyche.

The themes examined in this thesis are pertinent as much to the study of children's literature as they are to considerations of the series as Anishinaabe. Ideas about home, place, family and storytelling remain central to the concerns of childhood and its literature despite a tidal change in the way literature for children is produced and consumed. Jack Zipes traces this shift from literature as edification, which he characterises as a means to "benefit children by improving their morals, instructing them, and amusing them"⁶⁸ to the commodification of fiction, "geared to configure the child [...] as a functional consumer."⁶⁹ Zipes refers to the plethora of associated merchandise and 'spin-offs' that accompany production of some literature and the effect of this on the reading process itself: "Reading a book is to provide immediate gratification, a quick fix [...] and a guarantee that the world is ordered in a conventional plot."⁷⁰ Whilst this criticism reflects a greater degree of commercialisation in the publishing industry, recognisable in literary 'blockbusters' such as the *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), it belies the development of indigenous and other minority literatures that negotiate what Clare Bradford describes as 'discursive pressures' between the agendas that

⁶⁸ Jack Zipes, *Relentless Progress: The Reconfiguration of Children's Literature, Fairy Tales, and Storytelling*, (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 33.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 13.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 14.

govern the production of books for children and the hegemonic and counter-discourses of settler society.⁷¹ The *Birchbark House* series is not characterised by commodification as Zipes describes it, possibly because the creation of associated playthings (dolls, games etc.) would be another example of commodification of Native culture and antithetical to Erdrich's claim to represent a true indigenous history. The novels also reject the idea of 'immediate gratification,' instead asking the reader to walk with Omakayas through all seasons, listening to stories and learning about Anishinaabe ways and customs.

A point of comparison to the study of Erdrich's novels is Sarah Winnemucca's *Life Among the Piutes: their wrongs and claims* (1883; 2017). A precursor to Erdrich's children's fiction, this autobiographical narrative traces the arrival of white settlers and their effect on the Piute tribe, who at that time were "scattered over nearly all the territory now known as Nevada."⁷² The novel is focalised through a child and its narrative style is reminiscent of *Little House on the Prairie*, a novel that I examine in more detail in relation to homebuilding and interaction. Like *The Birchbark House*, the novel raises issues of Indian-settler dynamics from the perspective of a child, and touches on issues of family, home and belonging. The complex settler-Piute dynamics are worked out in the novel through the protagonist's own work as a "guide and interpreter during the Piute and Bannock war of 1878," and as such the novel engages more readily with the issues of war and dispossession.⁷³ By contrast, Erdrich's novels are more specifically engaged with Anishinaabe identity, language and customs, and though the arrival of settlers (and by extension war, deforestation, and displacement) is certainly felt throughout the novels, the plots focus on family dynamics and Omakayas' (later: Chickadee and Makoons')

⁷¹ Clare Bradford, *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Readings of Children's Literature*, (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), p. 24.

⁷² Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, *Life among the Piute: Their wrongs and claims* (1883; repr. Enhanced Media, 2017), p. 5.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 125.

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development within that family-tribal sphere. An example of this is in the reaction to the arrival of steamboats. In Winnemucca's narrative, the arrival of settlers has been foretold and is of great excitement to her grandpa, the tribal chief. He describes the white men as 'brothers': "My brother has a big house that runs on the river, and it whistles and makes a beautiful noise, and it has a bell on it which makes a beautiful noise also."⁷⁴ In *Makoons*, the steamboat is lamented for scaring away the buffalo and described as a "mad beast [...] belching blasts of stinking clouds, paddles lashed together into a giant wheel, it screamed again."⁷⁵ Though the experiences of Winnemucca and Erdrich's characters are at times, markedly different, both are an attempt at truth-telling, caught, as Bradford writes, between affirming indigenous cultures and depicting the negative effects of colonialism.⁷⁶ The novels portray a culturally-specific childhood, but are connected to the broader field of children's fiction by the recurrent tropes in the study of children's literature.

The first of these under consideration is the home. Questions about what it means to be 'at home' characterise much children's literature, and the trope of 'the home' in children's literature is the focus of a notable study by Mavis Reimer. Reimer's collection of essays, entitled *Home Words: Discourses of Children's Literature in Canada* (2008) explores homeliness and homelessness in settler and indigenous contexts in Canada. The idea of the home as a central tenet of children's literature feeds a second trope, the identity quest, to the extent that Reimer suggests metaphorical homelessness has been turned into an ideal vehicle for writers to develop the quest for an elusive stable identity.⁷⁷ Home is significant because it connotes belonging, safety and control – things that children have little or no agency in procuring, being

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 16.

⁷⁵ *Makoons*, p. 102.

⁷⁶ Bradford, p. 162.

⁷⁷ Mavis Reimer, ed., *Home Words: Discourses of Children's Literature in Canada*, (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), p. 2.

dependent on adults to secure a safe place to call home. Thus the home is also an ideal trope for exploring the child protagonist's development and maturation by taking them *away* from the stability of 'home,' and this is reflected in the A-B-A (or home – away – home) pattern of children's fiction which I examine further in chapters one and three.

Home in children's fiction is complicated further in the context of indigenous literature. Doris Wolf and Paul DePasquale comment that "the home evoked in Aboriginal children's literature is rarely limited to the physical structure in which the characters live."⁷⁸ Expanding to encompass the environment, a sense of place and ties to *homelands*, 'the home' as portrayed by Erdrich in *The Birchbark House* series is a series of structures, places and camps at points across the ancestral land of Madeline Island. Clare Bradford writes, "Any formulation of home incorporates a sense of who is included and who is excluded or marginal."⁷⁹ The question of marginality and exclusion is considered in more detail in chapter three, where I compare the physical structure of the house in Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* (1937) with the structures and dwellings used by Omakayas' family in different seasons. Home, in the context of indigenous fiction, has political, social and cultural ramifications that are at least partly addressed by Erdrich in telling the story of Omakayas' displacement and search for a home. In doing so, she breaks with Thomas King's observation that Native writers "assiduously avoid" the nineteenth century as a setting because of the "complex relationship between the nineteenth-century Indian and the white mind."⁸⁰ Erdrich's narrative portrays the past in a way that reconfigures the 'static' Indian of the past using Georg Lukacs' idea of a 'felt relationship

⁷⁸ Doris Wolf and Paul DePasquale, 'Home and Native Land: A Study of Canadian Aboriginal Picture Books by Aboriginal Authors', in Reimer, *Home Words*, pp. 87-105, (p. 99).

⁷⁹ Clare Bradford, 'The Homely Imaginary', in Reimer, *Home Words*, pp. 177-193, (p. 178).

⁸⁰ Thomas King, 'Introduction', in Thomas King, ed., *All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction* (Toronto: McClelland and Stuart, 1990), pp. ix-xvi, (pp. xi-xii).

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to the present [...] bringing the past to life as the prehistory of the present.”⁸¹ In her stories Erdrich brings to life a vibrant, growing family that have a connection to the future Anishinaabe that find a home on the Turtle Mountain reservation and beyond.

The family is the second trope of children’s fiction that emerges from both past and contemporary theory. The role of the family in children’s literature both reflects and shapes socio-political ideas about how adults and children live and relate to one another. Like the home, the family is simultaneously a site of containment that the child protagonist grows away from (as part of an identity-seeking mission, or upon maturity into adulthood) and a centripetal force that brings the journeying child or adolescent back to the safety and comfort of home. This becomes complicated in the context of indigenous studies, where the imposition of Western ideas about the home and family had devastating effects on indigenous populations through the forced removal of children to boarding schools and state care or adoption. Motherhood became a tool of colonisation, with the labelling of Aboriginal mothers as ‘inadequate nurturers’ as the justification for forced child removal to white adoptive families.⁸² The legacy of such removals has been loss of culture, community and language, making Erdrich’s novels, which prioritise a culturally-specific view of family and childhood all the more vital.

The intersection of state and family is pertinent to the study of adoption and assimilation, ideas that I explore more in chapter four. Two studies that have been helpful as I

⁸¹ Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel* (London: Merlin Press, 1965), p. 53.

⁸² The policies of child removal in the USA and Canada are the focus of various scholarly works, but in particular see: D. Memee Lavell-Harvard and Jeannette Corbiere Lavell, eds., *‘Until Our Hearts are on the Ground’: Aboriginal Mothering, Oppression, Resistance and Rebirth*, (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2006), Beth H. Piatote, *Domestic Subjects: Gender, Citizenship, and Law in Native American Literature*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), and Margaret D. Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).

have considered the role of the family in nineteenth century America are Diana Pazicky's *Cultural Orphans in America*, (2008)⁸³ which sets out the Puritans' adherence to the nuclear family structure and the relationship between the nascent identity of the United States and the imagery of orphanhood; and Cathleen D. Cahill's *Federal Fathers and Mothers*, (2011) which chronicles the development of the Indian Service and examines how the federal government assumed a parental role toward Indian 'wards.'⁸⁴ When read in conjunction with *The Birchbark House* series, the cultural differences between Anishinaabe and settler family structures are stark, and the series touches on some of the devastating effects of early U.S. policy on Native American families.

The parent-child relationship is another central tenet of the family trope within children's literature. The didacticism that characterises some children's fiction enacts, in the portrayal of the 'ideal' family, what Ann Alston refers to as an "ideological system in which issues of power and control are embedded."⁸⁵ This refers to the early nineteenth century characterisation of the family as a centre of discipline and surveillance, over which the father, as head of the household, reigned. As the structure and power balance of families has changed, so too, has the literature that would hold up the family as a sacrosanct unit. Though the family unit remains central to children's fiction, and the primary means by which children are socialised, Kimberley Reynolds posits that the narrowing of the 'generation gap' as a result of parents adopting aspects of youth culture (partly as a means of being closer to their children), has stifled youth culture and altered the literature produced for young people to reflect trivial

⁸³ Diana Loercher Pazicky, *Cultural Orphans in America*, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2008).

⁸⁴ Cathleen D. Cahill, *Federal Fathers and Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

⁸⁵ Ann Alston, *The Family in English Children's Literature* (Abingdon, Oxford: Routledge, 2008), p. 9.

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concerns and a lack of rebellion or insight.⁸⁶ These are two extremes of the spectrum of parent-child relationships which affect the type of stories produced, though characteristically, the adult or parent, like the home, is something to be 'escaped' from in order to have a true adventure, even if it is that nurturing relationship that is longed-for on return. As I explore in chapter four, Erdrich's novels offer an Anishinaabe understanding of family and kinship structures which differs in many ways from the Anglo-American ideas of family that form the basis of much scholarly work in children's literature. As indigenous fiction for children continues to gain momentum, there is emerging a body of theoretical work that recognises the social, cultural and political values under which it is produced, though usually as an offshoot of adult fiction. This thesis aims to develop that scholarship, offering an understanding of indigenous children's fiction that is framed by culturally specific beliefs and methodologies.

The adult-child relationship, and the idealism of the family and the home are connected to the theme of storytelling which I have already discussed in relation to Anishinaabe studies. Where it relates to children's literature in particular, is in the ideology behind the ways in which stories shape an individual's worldview, and can be thought of as cultural agents. Tony Watkins describes stories as "maps of meaning that enable our children to make sense of the world [...] narratives, we might say, shape the way children find a 'home' in the world."⁸⁷ The impact of stories on our lives is profound – one of the reasons children's literature is often viewed as 'static' is because of the reinforcing principles and tropes that govern the production of texts for children. In chapter five I consider storytelling in an Anishinaabe context, which leads to an understanding of stories as living, shaped anew by each telling, and Erdrich's texts therefore

⁸⁶ Kimberley Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) pp. 76-77.

⁸⁷ Tony Watkins, 'Cultural Studies, New Historicism and Children's Literature', in *Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism*, ed. by Peter Hunt, (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 173-195, p. 183.

encompass both the physical book, written partly in a Western narrative form (though as I have shown, not conventionally), and Anishinaabe living stories, those that continue to be told outside of the fixity of the English language and print form. The issue of finding a home through narrative is key to this study. In chapter one I explore Jean Mendoza and Debbie Reese's suggestion that children need literary 'mirrors'; that indigenous identity (history, and culture) needs to be modelled in children's books to ensure that the 'maps of meaning' are relevant to all children and cultures, rather than a continual reinforcement of the dominant discourse.

Children's literature, in form, has also been thought of as something of a playground for adult novelists – a place where the restrictions that govern 'sensible' novels for adults do not apply. As Reynolds explains:

Even when writers consciously adhere to the various unwritten rules about what kind of material is suitable for children, there is abundant textual evidence suggesting that addressing a child audience removes some of the censors and filters that come into play when writing for adults.⁸⁸

Children's literature as a site of experimentation seems to both elevate and demean its status at the same time – on the one hand implying a guinea-pig audience, whose opinion is not as critically valid, whilst at the same time opening up the potential for ground-breaking new literature that broadens the horizons of its readership.

I argue that children's fiction is more often the latter, and that reading about different cultures, people and worlds (fictional or not) develops empathy and global awareness. Multicultural children's fiction is one way of addressing the imbalance in literary portrayals of culture groups, but it is not without limitations. Grit Alter reflects on the increase of multicultural books published in the decade since 2002, and the rarity of "representations featuring minority characters whose experience is not limited to negotiating tense relations

⁸⁸ Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature*, p. 16.

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with a dominant, white mainstream.”⁸⁹ In other words, multicultural literature that features characters from ethnic minorities tends to represent them in relation to the dominant culture. Additionally, Botelho and Rudman comment on the lack of distinction between cultures portrayed in such literature: “Multicultural children’s literature grossly lumps cultural groups, including African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino/a Americans, and Native Americans, and obscures intragroup and intergroup diversity and power relations.”⁹⁰ This results in a form of homogeneity and stereotyping when diverse nations of Native Americans, for example, are all characterised in the same way as adhering to certain customs. A lack of authenticity in representation undermines the benefits of an increase in multicultural publications, illustrated by the influential work of Debbie Reese, Doris Seale, and Adrienne Keene. This in turn highlights the place of works such as *The Birchbark House* series, which is tribally specific and resists telling Ojibwe story *in relation to* settler culture. Instead, the normative values of the novels are Anishinaabe, and the aspects of settler culture that impinge upon those values are seen as intrusions.

The challenge in reading these novels as children’s fiction, as I have suggested, lies in reconciling the history and values that have shaped children’s literature as a field of study with the Anishinaabe values that have shaped these texts. That is not to say they are not children’s fiction -- as I have shown, there are characteristics shared between cultures of production that make them so, and at the very least they are written for a child audience. As Clare Bradford observes, “fiction, produced from within Indigenous cultures, is likely to advocate Indigenous

⁸⁹ Grit Alter, ‘Reflections on Multiculturalism in Canadian Fiction for Young People since 1950: A Contribution to National Identity Formation’, *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, 4.1 (2012), 178-189, p. 187.

⁹⁰ Maria José Botelho and Masha Kabakow Rudman, *Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children’s Literature: Mirrors, Windows, and Doors*, (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 102

values and perspectives even as it exploits some of the possibilities of Western forms.”⁹¹ The hybridity in construction of the novels is reflected in its protagonists and readership. There is a complex relationship between Omakayas, Chickadee and Makoons, the children that focalise the story, and the reader, posited by the publishers and the American school curriculum as a middle-grade American child who may or may not be Native (inevitably, also, extending to the adult readers that select and purchase books). As a result, there are two childhoods at work in relation to these novels; the white reader, possibly learning about Ojibwe culture for the first time, and the Native American reader, who is perhaps for the first time reading about his or her own culture in a way that celebrates its principles. Doris Seale and Beverly Slapin's analysis of Native American representation in children's books, *A Broken Flute* (2005), contains several examples of stories from Native children and adults who have experienced the damaging effects of stereotypical portrayals of indigenous people, including, at one museum, the belief that Native people were wiped out when settlers arrived. One child, upset by the portrayal of Native Americans in the novel *Caddie Woodlawn* (1935) persuaded her teacher to change the class text to *The Birchbark House*.⁹² That the *Birchbark House* stories embody the worldview and values of contemporary Anishinaabe studies again positions the series as an act of survivance, and establishes its relevance to modern Ojibwe children.

'Native American' Children's Literature

The *Birchbark House* series has emerged from Erdrich's stated desire to trace her own family history, and as such, they are considered historical fiction. Two of the novels have been

⁹¹ Clare Bradford, 'Reading Indigeneity: The Ethics of Interpretation and Representation', in *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, ed. by Shelby A. Wolf, Karen Coats, et.al, (New York: Routledge, 2011) pp. 331-341, (p. 333).

⁹² See Doris Seale and Beverly Slapin, eds., *A Broken Flute: The Native Experience in Books for Children* (Berkeley, CA: Oyate, 2005), pp. 10-20.

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recognised with the award of the Scott O'Dell prize. This designation is problematic, however, and requires further interrogation. One of the issues with the designation 'historical fiction' is the construct of the 'vanishing American'. Botelho and Rudman write of the presence of Native American characters in children's fiction that they "remain stereotypically rendered, many times left behind in historical times."⁹³ In Thomas King's book, *The Truth about Stories*, he writes that popular representation of American history "not only trapped Native people in a time warp, it also insisted that our past was all we had," a turn of phrase that mirrors his earlier assertion, "The truth about stories is that that's all we are."⁹⁴ Stories, in King's view, sustain culture, whether historical or contemporary, and it is these *living* stories that are the focus of Seema Kurup's argument for the re-categorisation of Erdrich's novels as fictionalised history, which she defines as a "history [...] based on the lived experience of a people and [their] stories." By contrast, Kurup argues, historical fiction "capture[s] a historical period, not a living story."⁹⁵ This kind of re-classification is also suggested by Rosenthal who contrasts historical novels, which "use history to authenticate literature" with historiographic metafiction, which "uses literature to question historiography."⁹⁶ *The Birchbark House* series is the latter, a testament to the strength and survival of stories and their people.

This is evident in the basis for the stories being Erdrich's own genealogy, with characters and events attributed to stories and records. This imbues the stories with greater significance as they represent real ancestors or persons from her ancestors' communities. Old Tallow is described as originating from a description Erdrich read in a traveller's report of a

⁹³ Botelho and Rudman, *Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children's Literature*, p. 106.

⁹⁴ Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Toronto, ON: House of Anansi Press, 2003) pp. 2, 106.

⁹⁵ Seema Kurup, *Understanding Louise Erdrich* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2016), p. 74.

⁹⁶ Caroline Rosenthal, *Narrative Deconstructions of Gender in works by Audrey Thomas, Daphne Marlatt, and Louise Erdrich* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2003) p. 21.

“six-foot-plus woman who could chase down bears with a lance and who lived with only her pack of dogs.”⁹⁷ Omakayas is introduced in the ‘thanks and acknowledgements’ of the first novel as a name found on a Turtle Mountain census. The reader is given their first taste of the significance of names, when Erdrich writes: “Dear reader, when you speak this name out loud you will be honouring the life of an Ojibwa girl who lived long ago.”⁹⁸ In an interview given to *Booklist*, a letter from an ancestor is credited with starting off the first novel: “The letter says simply, ‘All the Indians between Michigan and Wisconsin dead of smallpox.’” *The Birchbark House* begins with a scene of devastation after a smallpox outbreak, and another epidemic and its ramifications provide the plot’s denouement. Later in the same interview, Erdrich acknowledges her desire to counter the romantic images of Native people, choosing to write a more realistic account of life in the nineteenth century: “You needed such an enormous amount of work to get by [...] one of the reasons I love writing about this culture is that it’s so rich, and it’s so funny, and there’s so much warmth.”⁹⁹ The laughter in the novels is an important counterpoint to the threat posed by settlers, and it is a common theme between Erdrich’s children’s novels and her writing for adults. Despite the dark themes in the novels, some critics perceive limitations in the ability of children’s fiction to adequately represent this turbulent period in history.

David Stirrup has described the encounter between Omakayas and the settler child, named ‘Break-Apart girl’, in *The Game of Silence* as ‘deeply reductive’ for its failure to convey the complexity of the relationships between settlers and Ojibwe – a failure he attributes to the book because it is written as children’s fiction. He goes on to argue that the simplicity of the

⁹⁷ Hazel Rochman, ‘The Birchbark House’, *Booklist*, 1 April 1999, p. 1427.

⁹⁸ Louise Erdrich, ‘Thanks and Acknowledgements’ in *The Birchbark House*, (New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1999, repr. 2002).

⁹⁹ Hazel Rochman, ‘The Birchbark House’, p. 1427.

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narrative in dealing with such issues “raises the spectre of the kind of elisions and attitudes that embody the *Little House* flaws,”¹⁰⁰ by which he refers to Laura Ingalls Wilder’s series, *The Little House on the Prairie*. Whilst there is certainly merit in Stirrup’s argument that the novels risk promulgating a sense of victimhood because they do not – perhaps, cannot – address the overwhelming complexities of historical and political processes, I argue that the novels’ primary audience is the child reader, for whom the tragedies and victories in westward expansion are experienced through the eyes of a child. In contrast to *Little House*, which presents an inevitability to the destruction of tribal land, Erdrich offers a more nuanced perspective that shifts the gaze of the coloniser back on itself to prioritise an Anishinaabe understanding of events. A sense of victimhood is also present in Erdrich’s adult fiction – for example, Romeo Puyat in *LaRose* is a broken, addicted, boarding-school survivor - arguably, a victim. What critics recognise in Erdrich’s adult fiction is her ability to draw humour and irony from desperation, and this comes from the life that goes on despite the chaos: “the residents in the senior center [...] the teenage girls left to navigate around their parent’s mess.”¹⁰¹ In the *Birchbark House* novels, Omakayas is the child, learning to make sense of, and navigate around a complicated and confusing world. Her family were victims – of smallpox, famine, and displacement - but as Stirrup acknowledges, they were also survivors. The sense that it is Erdrich’s family history woven throughout the narrative reinforces this point as the reader knows that the stories connect in the future to the life of a living author. Margaret Noodin writes: “Erdrich’s books serve as personal testimonies of survival,”¹⁰² and this is nowhere clearer than in her personal connection to the story of her ancestors.

¹⁰⁰ David Stirrup, *Louise Erdrich*, p. 189.

¹⁰¹ Thomas Curwen, ‘In Louise Erdrich’s ‘LaRose,’ parents make an impossible bargain.’ *Los Angeles Times* 6 May 2016, <<http://www.latimes.com/books/la-ca-jc-louise-erdrich-20160508-story.html>>

¹⁰² Noodin, *Bawaajimo*, p. 62.

Recognising that the series is widely accepted as historical fiction, and considering the limitations of that designation, at various points in the thesis I have found it helpful to analyse contemporary Native American children's fiction alongside *The Birchbark House* novels. Sherman Alexie's 2007 novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is an autobiographical account of teenager Junior, who leaves his Spokane Indian reservation to attend an all-white high school. The resulting conflict of identity is the focus of the novel that goes on to explore the possibility of hybrid identities and what it means to belong as part of a tribe. Carter Meland's 2017 novel, *Stories for a Lost Child* speaks of the power of story to shape a person's identity. In this novel, the teenage protagonist, Fiona, is cut off from her Anishinaabe heritage by her mother's refusal to talk about her father, Fiona's grandfather. Through stories delivered to her by letter after his passing, her grandfather gives her the tools to discover what it means to be Indian, and a greater understanding of Anishinaabe culture through both traditional and original stories. These comparisons enable me to situate *The Birchbark House* series within the field of Native American children's fiction, drawing on shared themes such as storytelling that build a bigger picture of what it means to be Native in the twenty-first century.

Understanding the novels as children's fiction sheds new light on the transmission of cultural knowledge and values that specifically relate to the themes pertinent to childhood, such as identity and family, and those which are explored in this thesis such as home, land and story. Noodin writes: "[Omakayas'] youth affords Erdrich the opportunity to explain and present many details of life that might be taken for granted in the context of an adult world."¹⁰³ One result of this is the development of a conspiratorial relationship between the characters

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 77.

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and the reader, as we see in *The Game of Silence* where the reader 'overhears' adult conversation with Omakayas:

As the older women talked together just outside the lodge, Omakayas made herself very quiet [...] She kept her ears open, although she shut her eyes and pretended to sleep. It was the best way to hear things the women thought too grown up for her ears.

The effect of Omakayas' deception mirrors the ways in which children glean information from adult conversation, and it draws attention to childhood as a period of knowledge-gathering in which the child appears to lack control over the type of information that is shared. At the same time, it demonstrates resourcefulness and agency as Omakayas manipulates the situation in order to gain information.

The focalisation of the novels through a child's eyes develops an emotive response in the reader by associating the development of the United States with the destruction and loss that results from it. The childlike wonder with which Makoons and Chickadee approach the buffalo hunt in *Makoons*, or the awe with which Chickadee views the burgeoning city of St Paul in *Chickadee* also makes the sadness at the loss of the buffalo herd, and the shock of the loss of trees cut down to build the city, more keenly felt. Catherine Rainwater describes Erdrich's work as a "call on us to develop a new historical consciousness"¹⁰⁴ and this thesis argues that this is achieved by focusing on the child character, who, like the child reader, learns from the events of the narrative how to live in accordance with the Anishinaabe worldview in order to achieve the good life, *mino-bimaadiziwin*.

A postcolonial reading of Native American texts might refer to the concept of 'writing back,' the term used defined by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin as the process of re-writing as a

¹⁰⁴ Catherine Rainwater, 'Louise Erdrich's Storied Universe', p. 277.

method of “restructuring European ‘realities’ in post-colonial terms, not simply by reversing the hierarchical order, but by interrogating the philosophical assumptions on which that order was based.”¹⁰⁵ This can indeed be observed in much Native writing for children. One of the significant features of some indigenous writing for children is that it is a *re-writing* and re-claiming of indigenous stories, such as in the case of Abenaki author Joseph Bruchac who has written, amongst some original contemporary fiction, novels telling the stories of Pocahontas, Sacajawea, Crazy Horse and Squanto – ‘famous’ Native characters whose stories have been told myriad ways from a colonial perspective as ‘helpers’ or ‘enemies’ of white settlers. By rewriting these well-known cultural narratives, the ownership of the story, and of that part of history, is being claimed by indigenous authors and is a form of resistance to the dominant cultural narrative that continues to frame Native history in colonial terms.

Bradford, in her comparative study of postcolonial children's fiction, outlines the argument within postcolonial theory between two understandings of writing-as-resistance as either “a collision between force and counter-force [...] or as [a] more dialogical and transformative process.”¹⁰⁶ It is possible to conceive of Erdrich's series as the former, a static re-writing of the past from an indigenous perspective, and a counterpoint to historical portrayals of Indians, such as the ‘vanishing’ Indians in Laura Ingalls Wilder's domestic narrative, *Little House on the Prairie*, as several other critics have done.¹⁰⁷ However, the focus on colonisation in Indigenous studies has been criticised by Sophie McCall as an approach that

¹⁰⁵ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989, repr. 1991) p. 33.

¹⁰⁶ Bradford, *Unsettling Narratives*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁷ See R Natov, ‘Child Power in Louise Erdrich's Historical Fiction for Children’, *International Research in Children's Literature* 2.1 (July 2009), 135-139, and Anne K. Phillips, ‘Shoring Up *The Birchbark House*’, in *Frontiers in American Children's Literature* ed. by Dorothy Clark and Linda Salem, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016), pp. 133-148.

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“prioritizes the people’s losses”¹⁰⁸ and this thesis argues for a different reading of Erdrich’s texts, one which moves away from postcolonial discourse and instead seeks to understand the novels as a specifically Anishinaabe historiography.

As Erdrich herself has suggested, *The Birchbark House* series elicits comparison with Laura Ingalls Wilder’s series, *The Little House on the Prairie*. Published in 1935, and set in the late nineteenth century, the events of Wilder’s novels occur in a similar period to Erdrich’s stories of displacement. The novels share similarities in form - both stories claim to be based on real events, are focalised through a young girl and have common themes – such as the home, family, displacement and belonging. To read Erdrich’s work solely as a ‘corrective’ to the racism of Wilder’s text – or as a re-writing of this period of history – has been described by Seema Kurup as “a form of literary colonisation”¹⁰⁹ and whilst that is not the intent of this thesis there are helpful points of comparison which develop my argument that Erdrich’s novels offer an Anishinaabe understanding of the world. As Margaret Noodin points out, the *Birchbark House* novels reflect a desire on Erdrich’s part to produce an ‘interventionist’¹¹⁰ text, and whilst I have briefly alluded to the similarities between the stories, the differences provide the crux of my argument for considering the two sets of novels alongside one another. In an interview with Hazel Rochman, Erdrich comments on the connections between the two series:

Certainly those books were formative for me [...] In the Little House books there are always these moves from place to place. The fact is that any time land was opening up, it was land from which native people were displaced, and in every Ojibwa family there’s a similar series of moves.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Sophie McCall et al, *Read, Listen, Tell: Indigenous Stories from Turtle Island* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2017), p. 157.

¹⁰⁹ Kurup, *Understanding Louise Erdrich*, p. 73.

¹¹⁰ Margaret Noodin, 'Language Revitalisation, Anishinaabemowin, and Erdrich's *The Birchbark House Series*', in Clark and Salem, *Frontiers in American Children's Literature*, pp. 123-132. (p. 131).

¹¹¹ Hazel Rochman, 'The Birchbark House' p. 1427.

Erdrich's novels, then, chronicle the 'series of moves' for one particular Ojibwa family, in a refutation of Wilder's nameless and vanishing Indians. As I have suggested, *The Birchbark House* is not to be read solely as an alternative historical text, but functions as both a response to colonialism and a declaration of Anishinaabe values. These values are seen clearly in contrast to aspects of the *Little House* books which I explore in later chapters - attitudes towards strangers – the 'Other' – and homebuilding, which occupies a significant role in both narratives. Wilder's series perpetuates the 'vanishing Indian' myth and affirms the belief of manifest destiny¹¹² in white conquest and settlement. Mark Rifkin writes "The representation of native peoples as either having disappeared or being remnants on the verge of vanishing constitutes one of the principle means of effacing Indigenous sovereignties"¹¹³ and this is pertinent to the discussion of literary representation as a meeting place between the literary, or imagined, and the real, which I discuss in chapter two in relation to land rights.

Chapter Overview

The extent of Native stereotyping is explored further in the first chapter of this thesis, through the analysis of two prominent 'texts' that are well known for their portrayal of Native Americans; Disney's *Pocahontas* and Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*. This thesis primarily intends to consider Erdrich's novels in their own right, but this background provides some context for the literary and cultural landscape into which they are received, and are examples of the likely cultural encounters with Native Americans that the readership will have experienced. The first chapter also develops the discussion of children's literature,

¹¹² Manifest Destiny is a term popularised in the late nineteenth century which refers to the belief that the expansion of the United States westward across the continent of North America, including the spread of Christianity and 'Western' values, was inevitable and God-given.

¹¹³ Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 5.

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considering how the novels conform to, and differ from the key tropes identified by Perry Nodelman in his seminal work, *The Hidden Adult* (2008). In addition, questions of censorship and accessibility – in other words, the control over the production and dissemination of children’s fiction – are examined in relation to ideas about childhood and the child reader.

Chapter two begins the thematic consideration of the novels by exploring the Anishinaabe relationship to land and environment, situating the novels within the wider discourse of treaty negotiation and land rights. Beginning with spirituality, the chapter reads the novels in light of Anishinaabe beliefs about the environment, and in the close reading of Omakayas’ spiritual development as it relates to her interaction with various animals and the natural world. The chapter then considers how the Anishinaabe worldview portrayed by the series has both been fetishised and misunderstood by settlers, who interpreted indigenous hunting practices as inferior to Western farming methods. This develops into a discussion of sustainability in hunting practices, through a close reading of *Makoons*, which lends itself to consideration of the destruction of buffalo herds and woodland. The maps that are provided to show the journey of Omakayas and her family are explored which leads into a section on borders, and finally, consideration is given to a sense of place and its relationship to the concept of a homeland.

The third chapter focuses on the meaning of ‘Home’ within the novels. This is broken down into sections that interrogate the home firstly as symbolic as a ‘safe space’, drawing on contrasts between the mobility and construction of the home(s) in *The Birchbark House* series with the home-as-protection in Ingalls Wilder’s series. Secondly, the chapter develops an understanding of the A-B-A pattern of home and away common to children’s fiction in an Anishinaabe context, by looking at the practice of vision quests. Finally, the different types of dwellings that constitute ‘home’ for Omakayas are explored in relation to two aspects of

homeliness that emerge from close reading; the home as a space for dreaming, and the home as a working place.

Family is the third trope that this thesis examines in relation to the Anishinaabe worldview. The fourth chapter is shaped by a discussion of kinship and gender identity, beginning with exploring how the novels themselves explore relationships and family or kinship ties. Adoption features heavily in the novels and this is reflected in the chapter with a discussion of the formation of family and belonging within the tribe. A discussion of gender roles forms a considerable part of this chapter, concerned as it is with the way in which the texts engage with Anishinaabe norms for gendered behaviour, including characters who fulfil roles as two-spirit. The division of work and the education of children into Anishinaabe customs is also examined which leads to a discussion of eldership. Lastly, the chapter discusses the ways in which ideas about family relate to the exchanges between Native Americans and settlers during the period of nation-building and assimilation.

The last chapter emerged from a growing awareness of the significance of story within Anishinaabe studies. It examines the different types of story and storytelling in Anishinaabe culture, through an analysis of the embedded stories from the oral tradition that are told to Omakayas by her elders, and which she in turn tells to her sons. The chapter takes a variety of approaches to storytelling, beginning with stories as empowerment. Susan Perez Castillo has observed of Erdrich's writing, alongside Leslie Marmon Silko's, that both authors "offer us a fascinating glimpse into the world of Native American oral tradition," describing Native Americans as a "people who use the vital capacity of discourse to shape – and not merely reflect – reality."¹¹⁴ The examination of story in this thesis will consider the way in which stories

¹¹⁴ Susan Perez Castillo, Postmodernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko-Erdrich Controversy', *The Massachusetts Review*, 32.2 (1991), 285-294, p. 294.

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give Omakayas courage and strength, and also support and sustain Anishinaabe culture. The next section of the chapter considers the relevance of stories to place and time, reflecting on how stories are tied to particular places and how this manifests itself within the narrative. Thirdly, the pedagogical aspect of stories is considered and I explore how they might function as elders. The sacredness of stories as they relate to the principles of *mino-bimaadiziwin*, or the good life, is then discussed prior to considering the ways in which stories contribute to the revitalisation of language and culture.

Children's Literature and the Child Reader

Children's literature is broadly defined as texts or picture-books 'written for children' (usually by adults).¹ This allows for a wide range of texts for children to be studied within the category of 'children's literature', from baby board books, to picture books and fiction for children and young adults. There are marked differences between these types of text, just as there are marked differences between a pre-school child and a teenager, and children's literature in a commercial context tends to be first divided into age-appropriate categories and then broken down further by genre. The distinction of children's fiction into age groups is one of the things that marks it out as separate from adult fiction. It is a way for publishers and authors to identify a target audience, and is a guide to purchasers and readers of the suitability, both in terms of form and content, of the books being published. The practice of subdivision by age is commonplace by booksellers, despite the blurring of lines between categories and the fact that so-called 'age banding' is highly contentious. The Birchbark House novels are themselves age-banded by the publisher as suitable for 8-12 year olds.

A formal proposal by leading publishers in the UK to expand the practice in 2008 resulted in a fierce backlash by authors such as Philip Pullman and Anne Fine who argued that 'not every child is the same.'² This public debate over age guidance and suitability is indicative of a much greater underlying struggle for definitional control of the 'child' in the twenty-first

¹ For further exploration of this idea, see Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

² Philip Pullman, qtd in Anita Singh, 'Philip Pullman leads author revolt against age banding for children's books' *Telegraph* 4 June 2008 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2074620/Philip-Pullman-leads-author-revolt-against-age-banding-for-childrens-books.html>> Accessed April 2015.

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century. In the U.S., remnants of the Romantic construct of the child and childhood as a time of innocence continues to influence American society according to Ann Scott MacLeod, and as a result “accounts for the contemporary uneasiness”³ with contemporary childhood and its literature. Perry Nodelman contends that the position of the child (as it is constructed within children's fiction) is like the postcolonial ‘Other’ in its relation to adults – being both made like adults through an increase in knowledge and cultural understanding, and kept innocent by the (imposed) limitations of experience.

The ‘slipperiness’ that accompanies attempts to obtain precise definition of the nature of ‘the child’ and of children's literature has been given a great deal of scholarly attention and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to add to that work. I rely on the summary offered by David Rudd, and adopt the conclusion that it is precisely the lack of grasp on a definition that in the end becomes the definition itself – what a child, or childhood, is depends on who is articulating it, where they are in the world, and the culture of that place and time.⁴ As a result, children's literature is marked by its pluralism; it is uniquely positioned as a ‘transitional’ genre, and the characterisation of childhood that is present in many texts emphasises the differences between cultures, between children, and childhoods, and between children and adults. The schism at the heart of children's fiction is the imbalance of power within its modes of production between the adults that produce it and the children for whom it is intended, and the somewhat marginalised status of its audience, though this is shifting as technology and growing independence gives children more control over the type of stories they consume, and in what format. This thesis brings together the theory of children's literature with novels that

³ Ann Scott MacLeod, *Essays on Children's Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Athens, GA: Georgia University Press, 1995) p. 156.

⁴ David Rudd, ‘The Development of Children's Literature’ in *The Routledge Companion to Children's Literature*, ed. by David Rudd, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 3-13.

have emerged from Anishinaabe and American culture, in order to explore how the growing and changing field of children's literature impacts on the sharing of Anishinaabe culture with children and young adults.

Once thought of as a 'literary backwater', 'marginal to literary studies' and a 'ghetto', children's fiction has risen meteorically within both the publishing and public spheres. To an extent, Native literature has shared the fate of marginalisation, and as a result, Native children's literature can be considered doubly ghettoised. The works examined in this thesis are therefore especially complex as they are written by a female author from a marginalised culture, and in an often-overlooked form. However, the growth of children's fiction as an area of significance within publishing and popular culture is beginning to affect its marginalised status, and as a result, the boundaries of children's fiction are being tested. Sandra Beckett attributes this shift to the crossover fiction phenomenon.⁵ Crossover fiction bridges a gap between childhood and adulthood, featuring teenage protagonists who are taking on typically adult responsibilities or who are fighting for a 'greater good'. In doing so, they are mirroring, or providing (somewhat extreme) examples of adult responsibility, courage, and loss, with the satisfaction for the reader of a neat, often conventional (but not always happy) ending. This phenomenon has become apparent through the production of 'grown up' jackets for books that were originally marketed to children. The *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling is credited by Beckett with being responsible for the surge in this trend; other notable series to be marketed dually at children and adults include Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* and a repackaging of Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* trilogy and *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien.⁶

⁵ Sandra L Beckett, *Crossover Fiction: Global and Historical Perspectives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 59.

⁶ Beckett, *Crossover Fiction*, p. 111.

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The development and popularity of crossover fiction has resulted in the fear expressed by Julia Eccleshare that there will be “no children's books that are aimed solely at children.”⁷ The desire for a specific literature for children suggests a concern with the loss of the Romantic child as a separate, inviolate being that requires its own set of stories – ones that adults should have no part in enjoying. This concept echoes Jacqueline Rose's first reading of childhood as something that is left behind on reaching adulthood; a state of being that has ‘ceased.’⁸ By extension, it could be argued that the literature which defines it, and is defined by it, is also something to leave behind upon reaching adulthood, usually sooner. However, this view can be challenged by the elevated status of children's fiction and the continued loyalty with which certain stories are passed on from generation to generation.⁹ Guardian columnist and reviewer Emma Brockes claims: “returning to the books of one's childhood will thump you in the heart as much as anything,” suggesting that the books one reads can be at the centre of an emotional connectedness to significant periods in our lives.¹⁰ This is borne out by Rose's second construction of childhood, a reading of Freud in which she argues that “childhood is something in which we continue to be implicated and which is never simply left behind. Childhood persists.”¹¹ With this understanding of children's literature, I follow Peter Hunt's argument that the stories we read as children have, to a greater or lesser degree, an influence on our development. Since most adults, Hunt assumes, including those now in positions of power,

⁷ Julia Eccleshare, 'The Differences between Adult and Child Fiction', in *Books and Boundaries: Writers and Their Audiences* ed. by Pat Pinsent, (Lichfield, Staffordshire: Pied Piper, 2004), pp. 213-15, (p.213) qtd. in Rudd, *The Routledge Companion to Children's Literature*, p. 10.

⁸ Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 13.

⁹ Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* sold 30 million copies between 1945 and 2009. See Emma Brockes, 'This one's got legs', *Guardian* 14 March 2009 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/mar/14/eric-carle-author>>

¹⁰ Emma Brockes, 'This one's got legs' *Guardian* 14 March 2009.

¹¹ Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*, p. 12.

“read children’s books as children [...] it is inconceivable that the ideologies permeating those books had no influence on their development.”¹² The power of a story to shape attitudes and beliefs, even subconsciously, must alert us to an awareness of the effect that the stories have on the belief formation of readers, and that each story is a product of its own culture and time as writers are influenced in turn by the stories of their childhood.

Rosemary Johnston suggests that the modes of production of a text result in a form of cultural endorsement, as books follow a pattern of adult-led decisions from conception to publication, and then to purchase and promotion by parents, librarians and teachers. This process, she argues, makes books “rather like cultural mirrors that reflect what are widely held to be acceptable social positions.”¹³ To take this position wholeheartedly would necessitate a very narrow view of a cultural product, as one that reflects, but does not inform, society. The questions of whose society is being represented, and how, and when, need to be considered as does the fact that literature is not simply a result of culture but that the culture itself is ever-evolving and literature, in turn, has a position of influence in its development. That is not to say that literature, especially that for children, does not represent something of the culture from which it originates, or comment upon the socio-political values of the time. Literature has the power to shape attitudes and to challenge, as well as endorse, social positions. This is pertinent to this study of Louise Erdrich’s fiction for children which offers an Indigenous telling of Anishinaabe history, and this thesis seeks to engage with the ways in which Erdrich’s fiction presents an Anishinaabe worldview to the child reader.

¹² Peter Hunt, ‘Introduction’, *Understanding Children’s Literature*, 2nd edn, ed. by Peter Hunt, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 1-14, (p. 1).

¹³ Rosemary Ross Johnston, ‘Gender’, in *Children’s Literature Studies: A Research Handbook*, ed. by M. O. Grenby and Kimberley Reynolds, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 151-162, p. 154.

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Children's Literature and Censorship

One of the problems encountered when considering the 'cultural endorsement' of a novel is that the adults who control access to materials often disagree. A case in point is Spokane/Coeur d'Alene author Sherman Alexie's teen novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Published in 2007 and written semi-autobiographically, it portrays the experience of Arnold, a fourteen-year-old Native American living on a reservation with his parents and sister. After being advised by his teacher that if he wants to succeed he should leave the reservation, he joins Reardan, an elite, white high school and the novel traces the effects this has on not only his own identity as the only Indian in the school, but also on those he leaves behind. Alexie is not shy of the problems faced by modern reservation Indians and the novel touches on issues such as alcoholism, death and poverty. "I'm 14 years old, and I've been to 42 funerals," Arnold says. "That's really the biggest difference between Indians and white people."¹⁴ In the novel, Arnold loses his grandmother and his sister in quick succession, both in alcohol-related accidents. The novel's availability in public and school libraries, and its inclusion on many school curriculums has been challenged repeatedly by parents and teachers since its publication for reasons including, but not limited to; "anti-family, cultural insensitivity, drugs/alcohol/smoking, sexually explicit, violence, depictions of bullying."¹⁵ The autobiographical detail of the novel means that the contentious aspects are not necessarily gratuitous, even if they could be considered provocative. To campaign for the removal of depictions of reservation life that cause offence suggests a desire to present a sanitised version of life in difficult circumstances, and the suppression of the hardships felt by the indigenous

¹⁴ Sherman Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (London: Andersen Press, 2008), p. 199.

¹⁵ American Library Association, 'Banned and Challenged Books',

<<http://www.ala.org/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>> Accessed 30.4.15.

families on reservations. This again ties into a desire to protect a Romantic, innocent construct of the child by shielding them from alternative points of view, but also, as Michele Gil suggests, to “protect ourselves and [...] retain the hope of innocence.”¹⁶ The idea of adults also protecting themselves by censoring children's fiction reflects Rose's suggestion of the persistence of childhood and the emotional nostalgia attached to childhood reading.

The American Library Association compiles a top-ten list of ‘challenged’ books each year which are celebrated during Banned Book Week to campaign against censorship. A challenge is defined as “a formal, written complaint, filed with a library or school requesting that materials be removed because of content or appropriateness.”¹⁷ *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, after publication in 2007, has appeared in the top five every year since 2010 and was number 1 most recently in 2014. To put this into perspective, the top ten list has also included what are now held to be classics, such as J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series (objectionable because of ‘the occult’), Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (racism) and Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (for its religious and political viewpoint). Even sex-education books feature in the top ten for – unsurprisingly - sexual explicitness. M. C. Gurdon, a critic writing in the Wall Street Journal, expresses concern over the ‘darkness’ in young adult fiction, claiming: “Profanity that would get a song or movie branded with a parental warning is, in young-adult novels, so commonplace that most reviewers do not even remark upon it.”¹⁸ She mentions Chris Lynch's novel, *Inexcusable*, about an incidence of rape, *Shine* by Lauren Myracle because it contains episodes of sexual and homophobic abuse, and *Scars* by Cheryl Rainfield

¹⁶ Michele Gill, ‘The Innocence Project and the Portrayal of Male Prostitution in Fiction for Young Adults’ in *What Do We Tell the Children? Critical Essays on Children's Literature*, ed. by Ciara Ni Bhroin and Patricia Kennon, (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012) pp. 26-40, (p. 27).

¹⁷ American Library Association, ‘Banned and Challenged Books’.

¹⁸ M.C. Gurdon, ‘Darkness Too Visible’ *Wall Street Journal* June 4, 2011, <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303657404576357622592697038>>.

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about rape, self-harm and suicide. Whilst concern about the content of these novels is valid and deserves exploration, the tone of the article is condescending, and Gurdon recommends earlier works for teens by authors such as Judy Blume, whose 1975 novel *Forever* contains explicit sexual acts that Gurdon describes as “scenes of urgent practicality [...] objectionable [but not] grotesque.” *Forever* appeared at number 7 on the 100 most frequently challenged books list for 1990-1999 and appeared most recently at number 2 on the list in 2005. Alexie responds to Gurdon's fears directly in an article entitled ‘Why the Best Kids Books are Written in Blood’. He draws on his experience as the guest speaker at an alternative high school where students attending had suffered many of the experiences that Gurdon decries in young adult fiction. He argues passionately: “Does Ms. Gurdon honestly believe that a sexually explicit YA novel might somehow traumatize a teen mother? Does she believe that a YA novel about murder and rape will somehow shock a teenager whose life has been damaged by murder and rape?”¹⁹ His argument reflects the idea of children's books as cultural mirrors, in the sense that children who have suffered trauma need relatable novels that help them to cope.

Children's publisher Barrington Stoke entered this debate on their blog, after finding that some schools had issues with the explicit language present in some of their fiction for teenagers. They describe how a student, opposed to bad language, borrowed one of their books from the school library in order to cross out the language he disapproved of using correction fluid. Another student then borrowed the same book, along with an uncensored version, in order to write the ‘bad’ words back in.²⁰ This demonstrates that children are capable of choosing which materials are appropriate for their experiences and sensibilities, if

¹⁹ Sherman Alexie, ‘Why the Best Kids’ Books are Written in Blood’, *Wall Street Journal*, 9 June 2011, <<http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2011/06/09/why-the-best-kids-books-are-written-in-blood/>>.

²⁰ Barrington Stoke, ‘Strong Themes in Fiction for Children and Young People’, *Barrington Stoke Blog*, 9 December 2014, <<http://www.barringtonstoke.co.uk/blog/2014/12/09/strong-themes-fiction-children-young-people/>> Accessed 26.1.15.

they are given the opportunity to choose for themselves. As I have suggested earlier, stories for children are vehicles by which readers can explore difficult, new, perhaps even dangerous situations in their imagination – they are both a form of ‘escapism’ and identification, depending on the reader. Margaret Rustin, in her discussion of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, describes the experiences that a child protagonist might have in a fantastical realm (such as the entry into Narnia), as “explorations of emotional dilemmas children feel faced by in their everyday lives.”²¹ The presence of fictional danger, threats or thrills in literature for children can be a positive event for a conservative audience, if it enables readers to explore their feelings and potential responses to situations.

Reading *The Birchbark House* as Children's Literature

Erdrich's novels are aimed at pre-teen independent readers, roughly the age of the protagonist, Omakayas, whom we follow as a child between eight and ten years old. The novels are illustrated, but are not picture-books, and address some distressing themes. Although the stories are resolved ‘happily’, the conclusions are complex and point towards further difficulties ahead. To develop an understanding of these novels as children's fiction, I have turned to Perry Nodelman's seminal study of children's literature, *The Hidden Adult*. Nodelman offers readings of six apparently different texts in order to draw conclusions that go some way to offering a definition of children's literature by identifying key similarities in form, structure and content. To frame my reading of the *Birchbark House* series I have selected four of Nodelman's ‘markers of similarity’ that seem to me to be pertinent to the study of Erdrich's fiction. These are; nostalgia, didacticism, the A-B-A structure, and focalisation. I will examine

²¹ Margaret Rustin and Michael Rustin, *Narratives of Love and Loss: Studies in Modern Children's Fiction* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 40.

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these ideas with reference to the novels, in order to show how the Anishinaabe influence in Erdrich's writing both supports and occasionally subverts these 'expectations' for children's fiction.

Firstly, I will consider the claim that children's literature is inherently nostalgic, distinct from other forms of writing because adults write it for children. It consists of what adults hope children will read and experience, and how they will think and behave, modelling behaviour and responses through central characters. Even in less than favourable circumstances, the focalisation of the story through the eyes of a child lends an innocent lens, through which child (and adult) readers can view the world. Nodelman contends that children "learn childlikeness from children's books."²² It is not necessarily a childhood that any real child experiences, rather, what an adult wishes for them to experience. He later goes on to say that one of the main indicators of children's fiction is the way in which the books themselves encourage readers to feel and think about themselves and others, to such an extent that those thoughts and feelings will affect their relationships with others.²³

The word 'nostalgic' can be understood as a "sentimental longing [for] a period of the past" or a "longing for familiar surroundings" (homesickness).²⁴ Childhood in this context is constructed as a time that an adult longs to return to, and can vicariously do so by creating 'sentimental' children's fiction. In relation to the Birchbark House series, the interpretation of children's texts as nostalgic is problematic because Erdrich's novels are often read in relation to the sentimental recollections of pioneer stories such as Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series. Nostalgia-as-longing favours the dominant culture. Nonetheless, within the paradigm

²² Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 13.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 113.

²⁴ OED Online <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/128472?redirectedFrom=nostalgia#eid>> Accessed 6.5.15.

of the historical world that Erdrich creates, there are traces of nostalgia for a lost way of life, and a desire to overturn the impression left by Wilder of Native Americans as a vanishing people. By openly retracing the steps taken by her own family during the displacement of tribes onto land further west, Erdrich places the emphasis on survival and on the normalisation of the Ojibwe way of life.²⁵ She claims that the books were written for “children especially to identify and enter into a world where they are among a Native American family. This family had its angers, trials, happiness, pains, heroism, desperation, and annoyances. You know, everything that anyone's family has.”²⁶ Erdrich draws on her own experience of being the eldest of seven siblings to portray relationships between her characters, within the structured dynamic of a stable family. Values such as tolerance, forgiveness and respect are evident in family interactions, but there is also a consistent level of teasing among family members, and humour plays an important role in the narrative.

The antics of Pinch, Omakayas' brother, in *The Birchbark House* are described as the salvation of the family's souls after the devastating effects of smallpox and a harsh winter. After accidentally setting his trousers on fire, Pinch flings himself backwards into a bucket of cold water, becoming stuck there. The laughter that ensues is described as a “saving laugh”, for the “soul of the Anishinabeg is made of laughter.”²⁷ The growth of Pinch into a trick player is credited within *The Birchbark House* with ensuring the family's survival, and this reflects a common belief of the Ojibway about the importance of Nanabohzo, or the ‘trickster’ figure. Kenneth Lincoln writes, in *Indi'n Humor*, that through laughter, Indians “bond and revitalise,

²⁵ Lisa Halliday, ‘Louise Erdrich, the Art of Fiction no. 208’ *The Paris Review* 195 Winter 2010, <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6055/the-art-of-fiction-no-208-louise-erdrich>>, Accessed 2015.

²⁶ Teaching Books, ‘Louise Erdrich Written Interview’, 23 October 2009, <<http://www.teachingbooks.net/qlzku9>> Accessed 2015.

²⁷ Louise Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, (New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1999, repr. 2002), p. 186.

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scapegoat and survive [...] they draw on millenia-old traditions of Trickster gods and holy fools, comic romance and epic boast.”²⁸ Writing about Gerald Vizenor, Kimberley Blaeser suggests the power of humour in Native American writing to “disarm history, to expose the hidden agendas of historiography and [...] return it to the realm of story.” Vizenor, is, Blaeser argues, amongst those who have “approached the deadly business of history with trickster humor.”²⁹ The relationship between humor, the trickster, and survival is a thread that runs throughout Erdrich's other novels, and in his reading of Erdrich's adult novel, *Tracks* (1988), for example, Lawrence Gross (Minnesota Chippewa) attributes the survival of Nanapush and Margaret to their shared characteristics with the trickster figure and their adherence to “the old ways”.

Erdrich engages with the ‘comic vision’ of the Anishinaabe in order to portray a people that can ‘not only survive but thrive [...] build[ing] a new world, based on the old but responsive to the new.’³⁰ In light of this, the antics of a clumsy child take on a significance beyond the fairly mawkish close of chapter: “The harder they laughed, the more they knew, now, they would survive.”³¹ The introduction of the trickster points backwards through Erdrich's earlier work and into the ‘old ways’ of the Anishinaabe people; it also points beyond the text from the survival of this fictional family, to the survivance of Native people and the ‘active presence’ that the *Birchbark* series represent.³² It is in this sense that I would argue Erdrich makes her best claim to influence the ways in which children might ‘identify’ with Native people, past and

²⁸ Kenneth Lincoln, *Indi'n Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 22.

²⁹ Kimberley Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), p. 85.

³⁰ Lawrence W. Gross ‘The Trickster and World Maintenance: An Anishinaabe Reading of Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*’, *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 17.3 (2005), 48-66, pp. 59, 64.

³¹ Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, p. 186.

³² For further discussion of the concept of survivance see Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses: Native American Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), and the interrogation of the term in Jill Doerfler, ‘Postindian Survivance: Gerald Vizenor and Kimberly Blaeser’ in *Gerald Vizenor: Texts and Contexts*, ed. by Deborah Madsen and A. Robert Lee, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011) pp. 186-207.

present.

Sentimentality and longing, then, are a feature of Erdrich's series but arguably function differently to the way in which Nodelman suggests. Rather than constructing an idealised Anishinaabe childhood to which an adult might wish to remember or return to, the Anishinaabe childhood of Omakayas is used to point to a way of life that is being lost and to make broader claims to territories and homelands not through abstract nostalgia and longing but through the active remembrance and continuation of traditions that are threatened by removal. The sentimentality that Omakayas and her family express in the novel is not constructed as a longing for childhood per se, but for the way of life that characterised Omakayas' childhood and the sense of homeliness created by routine observations of the seasons and traditional hunting practices.

The second feature under consideration is the tendency towards didacticism. This is connected to the first idea of nostalgic representation by their shared emphasis on constructing worlds and belief formation in readers. The simplicity of the narrative presupposes a child-like view of the world on the part of the reader, and this then also becomes a device for instruction, even in what an adult might view as somewhat simplistic terms. Given that every new experience for a child is a learning experience, all books may be considered didactic, as Mendoza and Reese suggest through their reading of Lukens:

The child sees representations of people—male and female, adult and child—in illustrations that foster impressions of whatever sorts of people are being portrayed [...] In a sense, then, any given picture book featuring people may have a didactic outcome, even if teaching was not the book's intent.³³

³³ Jean Mendoza and Debbie Reese, 'Examining Multicultural Picture Books for the Early Childhood Classroom: Possibilities and Pitfalls', *Early Childhood Research and Practice* 3.2 (Fall 2001), Section Title: 'Picture Books for Young Children', <<http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v3n2/mendoza.html>>

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This understanding of the didactic nature of children's books emphasises the importance of positive, accurate representation in text and illustration in order that even subliminal pedagogical aspects would not perpetuate negative stereotypes. The teaching aspect of Erdrich's novels is generally, as Mendoza and Reese suggest, seen through portrayals of the characters and culture. In the way she relates stories and characters, Erdrich is teaching and modelling that culture. However, there are instances in the narrative where the didactic elements are more apparent, such as the discussion around westward expansion and displacement.

In *The Game of Silence*, Erdrich creates teaching space within the narrative by introducing a game in which the children compete to remain silent, in order to allow the adults to talk about serious matters. Whilst this could be read as excluding the child (for example, the news of the expansion West is not discussed as a whole family), it also reinforces the values intrinsic to the family structure, such as the authority of and respect for, elders. The children do not take centre stage and childhood is constructed as both frustrating (not knowing) and as a valuable time for freedom, learning and preparation.

As a result, Omakayas' position of partial or increasing knowledge mirrors that of the reader, the two becoming almost co-conspirators in the acquisition of knowledge. The reader learns of the information as the fictive children interpret it, but are also given extra information by the narrator that displays the book's most didactic elements:

Something about the black marks had gone wrong, Omakayas knew that. The black marks promised one thing, but the chimookomanag wanted to break that promise...Here is what had happened.³⁴

³⁴ Louise Erdrich, *The Game of Silence*, (New York: Harper Trophy, 2006), p. 20.

This short sequence is an example of the way in which Erdrich uses the focalisation of a child to convey the complex treaty negotiations and betrayals that occurred between tribes and settlers. The additional information provided by the narrator acts as a point of historical reference whilst the reactions of the family members, the “children [...] staring in horror” embed the historical narrative in the ‘real’, drawing the reader to sympathise with the family. This is cemented by the words of Old Tallow, a respected figure, whose response is to first lay blame with the tribe: “Perhaps we have broken our promise [...] find out what our foolish brothers have done!”³⁵ The immediacy of Old Tallow’s response within the text serves to foreground the sense of injustice being conveyed by Erdrich as she emphasises the tribe’s refusal to make assumptions of guilt on the part of the settler.

David Stirrup describes this as the book’s most “contentious pedagogical aspect,” because of its portrayal of the Ojibwe to an extent, as ‘victims’ despite their considerable power and status.³⁶ The sense of victimhood is perhaps exacerbated by the powerlessness of the child protagonist, for whom her place within the family and tribal structure is being established in the face of hugely significant changes to their traditional way of life. Stirrup suggests that the complexities of the “historical and cultural processes” and Native-white relationships are not what one expects to be “dealt with in a children’s book.”³⁷ I would argue that this assumption underestimates the power of children’s fiction to explore issues of great complexity with simplicity of narrative and from a child’s perspective. Given that the outcome of white encroachment and the Westward migration is known, Erdrich works within the parameters of history to portray a family who remain faithful to one another and to their customs, the series unfolding a micro-evolution of Native practices and beliefs that have

³⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 22-23.

³⁶ David Stirrup, *Louise Erdrich* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010) p. 187.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 189.

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ensured their survival to the present day.

Although pitched at children and young adults, the novels may be read by children of any age, Native or non-Native, and by adults who are choosing, purchasing, and sharing these novels with children (and perhaps, for their own enjoyment). The texts may therefore be working on different levels for different readers – for Native children, the message of survivance may be especially pertinent – though equally important for non-Native children and adults, who may have preconceived ideas about the 'vanishing' of Native culture. Again, for Anishinaabe children and adults, the novels may take on still more significance as they explore tribally-specific aspects of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Stirrup acknowledges the need for indigenous authors to counter the dominant hegemonic narrative and I would suggest that it is the form of a children's story itself that enables this story to be told to a broad audience as a counter-hegemonic narrative. It is the child-like naivety that makes the narrative accessible to the child reader, rendering the story 'recognisable' through the shared experience of family life and everyday experiences, as Margaret Noodin explains: "As they come in, sit down, busy themselves, eat, converse, and write, these characters are cast in a familiar light as people engaged in universal human activities."³⁸ From this starting point, Erdrich is able to share customs, stories and language specific to the Anishinaabe with readers, both child and adult.

The third aspect to consider is the A-B-A narrative structure. This is the idea that within the plot there will be a transition from a stable, safe space (home) – away – and back again. The experiences 'away' shape the perception of 'home' to the extent that it cannot be considered the same as before. Generally, the child protagonist learns the 'value' of home

³⁸ Margaret Noodin, 'Language Revitalisation, Anishinaabemowin, and Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* series,' in *Frontiers in American Children's Literature*, ed. by Dorothy Clark and Linda Salem, (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016), pp. 123-159, p. 127.

when they are away. The 'home and away' context could also be understood as a need for adventure and discovery that can be held in contrast to, and shed light on, the everyday domestic. Throughout the Birchbark House series, the physical 'home' is constantly under threat, and the family are journeying into new places. Nodelman's example of the home-away-home trope centres on the home as the site of oppression, with freedom to be found beyond.³⁹ In the Birchbark House series, this is not the case, in fact, it is the opposite. The danger that threatens the family unit – white encroachment and relocation – is enough to emphasise the value and safety of the home unit, without the need for individual rebellion. Adventure for Omakayas is found in the seasonal movement of the family, the exploration of the world around her, and her growing knowledge of Anishinaabe customs, which is discussed in more detail in chapter three.

The construct of home-away-home within the narrative also differs significantly from Nodelman's theory in that it is not constructed as a singular, physical dwelling. As I will show in chapter three, the home consists of a series of dwellings tied to particular aspects of the seasonal round – the winter lodge, nearer to the town and trading post, the ricing camp, and the summer birchbark house. All of these spaces as 'homes' elude the fixedness of the home-away-home trope, though, as I argue, it can be read partially through a series of small acts committed by Omakayas, and the principle of leaving home in the pursuit of new knowledge is visible in the vision quest. One of the key reasons beyond the construction of the home itself, for the lack of A-B-A structure within the Anishinaabe narrative, comes back to the construction of childhood. Leaving home by choice tends to be characterised by the pursuit of independence, which is not a trait that the narrative rewards. The emphasis within the series

³⁹ Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult*, p. 59.

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is rather on the collective family and tribal unit, so that whilst the children are taught to be independently capable of the tasks required to live as an Anishinaabe – they are not left 'dependent' on adults in that sense – they do not pursue the independence that characterises the home-away-home trope because they are positioned as a valuable member of a collective unit, on whom others depend, even at a young age.

The fourth and final trope that I want to consider is that protagonists are often children or child-like animals, and the story may be focalised through a child though often with a more knowledgeable, adult, narrator. This is closely related to didacticism and is, broadly speaking, an indication of the book's target audience. The presence of the external, adult narrator exposes the lack of knowledge on the part of the child protagonist and by extension, reader, serving as an 'educator' by explaining those things that the protagonist has only just understood or even failed to grasp. As I have discussed in relation to *The Game of Silence*, Omakayas' partial knowledge is exposed and then either corrected or build upon by the narrator, and this is repeated throughout the novels. As the series is planned to span one hundred or so years, to maintain a child's perspective necessitates a shift in focalisation, and the first major shift occurs in the fourth novel, *Chickadee*, when Omakayas is grown up and the novel is focalised through her son.

The changes in focalisation also create a shift in narrative perspective from a female to male child, so that the changes wrought upon the family by life on the Plains culture are understood slightly differently. An example of this is in *Makoons*, where the story focuses on the buffalo hunt in which the twin boys long to participate. As I discuss further in chapter four, the division of labour and gender roles suggests that a female child would not have had the same experience of the hunt as the twin boys and the focus of the narrative is shaped by the roles that the boys take on. Additionally, in *Chickadee*, the male focalisation enables Erdrich to

mirror the concept of apprenticing, so far explored through Omakayas' relationship with Nokomis. When trying to return home after being kidnapped, Chickadee is found by his Uncle Quill and learns from him about the trail of carts, trading and Metis culture. The child protagonist, as I suggested earlier, is a conduit for knowledge, by reflecting the reader's own lack of knowledge about the culture and enabling a shared learning experience through narrative events.

As I discussed in the introduction, one of the key aspects of Indigenous storytelling is that stories are pedagogical. However, subtle differences between pedagogy and didacticism reveal cultural differences between Anishinaabe storytelling-as-teaching, and the moral instruction to which Nodelman refers. The pedagogical aspect of Anishinaabe stories leaves the interpretation to the listener or reader, thereby limiting the imposition of meaning or moral imperative by the teller. In some ways this is true of all stories and storytellers – it is, in David Treuer's terms, the vulnerability of fiction – but understood in the context of didacticism and the development of children's literature, the openness of interpretation that is modelled by Erdrich in this series can be read by contrast as an act of empowerment for the child listener or reader. The expectation within Anishinaabe culture that everyone has something to contribute means that children are also encouraged to tell stories, which complicates the idea of the storyteller or narrator as a more knowledgeable, corrective presence. Therefore, whilst didacticism is a part of stories, the outcome of a story is a more dialogic process to help the individual learn more about their culture, themselves and the world around them.

Stereotypes and Popular Culture

Roberts, Dean and Holland argue that "no other ethnic group in the United States has

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endured greater and more varied distortions of cultural identity than Native Americans."⁴⁰ The proliferation of images purporting to represent Native Americans in the collective cultural psyche today range from sports mascots to spiritual guides, threatened species to superhero. These images, Friedman suggests, amount to bullying "on a national scale".⁴¹ The campaign against the use of the 'Redskins' name by the Washington football team is ongoing, but there have been some steps forward in other areas, such as the retirement of Chief Wahoo as the mascot for the Cleveland Indians baseball team. Dean Chavers, author of the book *Racism in Indian Country* (2009) blames historical policies for the current attitude to stereotyping:

Until the 1950s there was a very sharp separation between Indians and the rest of society [...] white people didn't see Indians and they could make all the fun of them they wanted and nobody cared [...] people get used to racism.⁴²

Even the term Indian, used by Chavers, originates from a misperception, and is symptomatic of the early settler reductionism that failed, and continues to fail to recognise the cultural and linguistic diversity of Native Americans.⁴³ The consequences of the ongoing perpetuation of stereotypical images, (whether positive or negative), have been studied by Fryberg et al. who concluded the following:

The current American Indian mascot representations function as inordinately powerful communicators, to natives and nonnatives alike, of how American Indians should look and behave. American Indian mascots thus remind American Indians of the limited

⁴⁰ Lisen C. Roberts, Eliza Dean and Marna Holland, 'Contemporary American Indian Cultures in Children's Picture Books', *Beyond the Journal – Young Children on the Web*, NAEYC 9.16, (November 2005), p. 1.

⁴¹ Michael A Freedman, 'The Harmful Psychological Effects of Washington Redskins Mascot', *Indian Country Today*, 27 September 2013, <<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2013/09/27/harmful-psychological-effects-washingtons-redskins-mascot>> Accessed 25 February 2015.

⁴² Dean Chavers, qtd by Tansy Hoskins, 'Washington Redskins: do offensive team names endanger public health?' *Guardian*, 25 October 2013, <<http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/washington-redskins-native-american-stereotypes-bullying>> Accessed 25 February 2015.

⁴³ See Robert F. Berkhofer, 'Part One: The idea of the Indian: Invention and Perpetuation' in Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2011), p. 3.

ways in which others see them. Moreover, because identity construction is not solely an individual process (i.e., you cannot be a self by yourself), the views of American Indians held by others can also limit the ways in which American Indians see themselves.⁴⁴

To examine this in more detail I have chosen the following two examples of popular stereotype because of their enduring appeal to a similar audience at which Erdrich's novels are also aimed - the 1995 Disney film *Pocahontas* and the pioneer narrative *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Positioned by Erdrich herself as an antithesis to *The Birchbark House* series, the novel's engagement with Indians as both threat and spectacle delimits an insurmountable binary in which the unknowable (and unknown) tribe are expected to acquiesce to the pioneer's demand for land. Erdrich reverses this binary by writing a cast of Native characters that are knowable, placing the white settlers in the position of strange or exotic. The inclusion of the film in this thesis underscores the range of media through which images of Native Americans have been perpetuated. Furthermore, its endurance in children's popular culture suggests that it remains an influential part of world-formation and popular stereotype. All three representations – Erdrich's, Wilder's and Disney's – make some claim to represent real events, making them ideal narratives for comparison.

Disney's *Pocahontas* retells the story of the relationship between the daughter of a Powhatan chief, and the white settler John Smith in the early seventeenth century. Briefly, after the death of one of Pocahontas' suitors at the hands of the settlers, John Smith is condemned to death by Pocahontas' father until she intervenes, pleading with her father and eventually securing his release. Although much mythologised, it is this encounter for which Pocahontas is most enduringly remembered; her subsequent marriage to John Rolfe, adoption

⁴⁴ Stephanie Fryberg et al. 'Of Warrior Chiefs and Indian Princesses: The Psychological Consequences of American Indian Mascots', *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 30 (2008), 208-218, p. 216.

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of the English name Rebecca, and son Thomas are subsumed beneath representations of this first, dramatic rescue, though it is possible to argue that it is her subsequent actions that enabled the perpetuation of the myth of the first. An example of this is the Jamestown exhibition of 1907, in which the Powhatan nation were reduced to historical stereotype, "ghosts...looking on at the wonders of Euro-American might" with the exception of Pocahontas who is praised as the "guardian angel of the colony," the emphasis being on her transformation from "savage (but good) girl to civilised and Christian lady."⁴⁵ Her adopted 'whiteness' alleviates fears of miscegenation; the nobility conferred upon her aristocratic Southern descendants distinguishes them from others of mixed descent who were feared and mistrusted as 'part savage.'⁴⁶

Disney's 1995 film version of this legend is unsurprisingly problematic, described by a critic in *The Guardian* as an attempt "to give a generation of children the impression that the conquest of the Americas was a cheerful, cooperative effort between the enlightened Europeans and the accommodating natives."⁴⁷ The Indians are described as 'savages' by the English soldiers in the opening scenes of the film, a word which Pauline Turner Strong argues is "a potent and dangerous degrading epithet, comparable in its effects to the word 'nigger.'"⁴⁸ Whilst the term 'nigger' has rightly fallen out of common usage, the term 'savage' is "set to music in a G-rated film."⁴⁹ However, Disney's use of the term in context does not condone its use, rather, the actions of Pocahontas later serve to emphasise how wrong the myth of

⁴⁵ Frederic W Gleach, 'Pocahontas at the Fair: Crafting identities at the 1907 Jamestown Exposition' *Ethnohistory* 50.3 (2003) 419-445 pp. 428, 431.

⁴⁶ Robert S. Tilton, *Pocahontas: The Evolution of an American Narrative*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 11.

⁴⁷ Alex Von Tunzelmann, 'Poverty, alcoholism and suicide- but at least the natives can paint with all the colours of the wind', *Guardian*, 11 September 2008.

⁴⁸ Pauline Turner Strong, 'Animated Indians: Critique and Contradiction in Commodified Children's Culture' *Cultural Anthropology* 11.3 (August 1996), 405-424, (p. 418).

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 418.

savagery was, turning the accusation back on the English settlers in songs like 'Mine'. This depiction of the English offended a critic at *The Times* who wrote: "Disney's fable...is obviously a means of allaying a bad conscience, while voicing xenophobic resentments about corrupt Europeans."⁵⁰ Concern over terminology recognises the impact that popular media has; as Steven Mintz asserts: "Movies are educators with enormous power to evoke emotions and shape meanings, attitudes, and perceptions."⁵¹ For their part, and possibly somewhat ironically, Disney created Pocahontas as a response to criticism of racial stereotyping in its preceding films. Recruiting Native American consultants, and casting Russell Means, a prominent activist with the American Indian Movement in the role of Chief Powhatan, shows their intention to strengthen the Disney formula with some historical accuracy.

A survey of young girls' responses to the film suggests that it was taken more seriously by urban Native American girls, who shared a feeling of "authentic connectedness" compared to the Euro-American group who were "cynical and sarcastic." The author of the study postulates that the Native American girls might have embraced the movie because of a lack of "positive media images [...] with whom they want to identify." A third group of mixed race Native American girls living on a rural reservation took the film seriously, but the author asserts that their own sense of tribal identity "limits the significance of mediated representations."⁵² Disney's attempt at a more rounded, accurate portrayal is undermined by the sexualisation of Pocahontas and the unrelenting focus on violence from both sides.

The themes of ownership and domination that pervade the film echo closely Laura

⁵⁰ Gilbert Adair, "Animating History" *The Sunday Times*, 30 July 1995, qtd by Gary Edgerton and Kathy Jackson, 'Redesigning Pocahontas', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 24.2 (1996), 90-98, p. 97.

⁵¹ Steven Mintz, 'Review of *Coining for Capital: Movies, Marketing and the Transformation of Childhood* by Jyotsna Kapur', *Journal of Social History*, 40.2, (2006) 513-514, p. 513.

⁵² Amy Aidman, 'Disney's 'Pocahontas': Conversations with Native American and Euro American girls.' Paper presented at the International Communication Association Conference (San Francisco, May 1999).
<<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED427892.pdf>>

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Ingalls Wilder's portrayal of the Indian people as a dying race, characterised by their violence and voicelessness. The first encounter with Indians in *Little House* serves to illustrate the message of fear and mistrust that Caroline, the mother, has been unable so far to justify. Early in the novel, when Laura is persistent in her desire to see a 'papoose', Caroline chastises her, and Laura asks: "'This is Indian Country, isn't it [...] What did we come to their country for, if you don't like them?'" Through Laura's astute questioning, Wilder acknowledges concerns about settlement and rights – but doesn't allow them to be fully expressed or discussed.

Laura is put in a position of inferiority, in need of education, her questions dismissed like the Indians themselves with denial and deference to Washington that absolves the family of any guilt:

Ma said she didn't know whether this was Indian country or not. She didn't know where the Kansas line was. But whether or no, the Indians would not be here long. Pa had word from a man in Washington that the Indian Territory would be open to settlement soon. It might already be open to settlement. They could not know, because Washington was so far away.⁵³

The shorter, rapid sentences disrupt the leisurely, descriptive narrative to indicate a defensiveness and irritation on Ma's part, who turns from the question of Indian sovereignty to ironing the girls' dresses. This pattern is repeated later in the novel when Laura questions the wisdom of forcing the Indians to move west and is rebuked by her father:

'But Pa, I thought this was Indian Territory. Won't it make the Indians mad to have to' – 'No more questions, Laura,' Pa said firmly, 'Go to sleep.'⁵⁴

Once again the domestic idyll imposes itself in the place of any consideration of the Indians' humanity or sovereignty. The pursuit of civilisation is symbolised by the building of a house,

⁵³ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (Middlesex: Puffin Books, 1964), p. 37.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 158.

and no sooner is it complete than it is interrupted by the first contact with Indian visitors.

On first sight the men are described as 'naked, wild men' their eyes 'black and still and glittering, like snakes' eyes'. The settler children react with horror at the 'horribly bad smell' that emanates from the skunk skins used as coverings, and the greed with which the Indians eat the cornbread that Ma cooks: "They ate every morsel of it, and even picked up the crumbs from the hearth."⁵⁵ In this sequence Wilder "faithfully reproduces pioneering perceptions" by showing the Indians to be "intrusions [...] violations of settled space." However she does not ignore the "illegality of the Ingallses' residence" as Sharon Smulders suggests; setting up, but never exploiting, Laura's frustrated attempts to question as I have shown, and Pa's seeming kindness that is swiftly undercut.⁵⁶ Having responded placidly to Ma's fears about the Indians eating all the cornmeal and taking Pa's tobacco, he goes on to say "The main thing is to be on good terms with the Indians. We don't want to wake up some night with a band of screeching dev-" This undermines his more measured responses by suggesting that he is willing to placate the Indians because he fears their wildness. The wildness of the Indians in *Little House* is emphasised repeatedly through their difference to the civilised Ingallses. Later in the novel, the noise of an Indian war cry frightens the children, echoing an earlier sequence in which wolves surround the house, and by their parallel the novel reinforces the suggestion of the 'wildness' of the Indian people. This characterisation of Indians as wild and savage echoes settler-colonial justifications for war and dispossession. The reinscribing of indigenous sovereignty and survivance through children's fiction is all the more significant as one considers the representation that Wilder's books – celebrated in mainstream popular culture – make of indigenous peoples.

⁵⁵ Wilder, *Little House*, pp. 93-97.

⁵⁶ Sharon Smulders, "'The Only Good Indian': History, Race, and Representation in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 27.4 (2002), 191-202, p. 197.

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Despite their fearfulness of the 'wild men', for the children in the novel the Indian people also represent a source of fascination that manifests itself as a desire for commodification. Laura's desperation to see a 'papoose' or Indian baby can be viewed as an extension of her parents' attitude to settling the land – the Indian as disappearing spectacle. This is most clearly seen during the Indian movement west at the end of the novel. As she watches, full of excitement at the parade of Indians, Laura has "a naughty wish to be a little Indian girl." Here, fear has been replaced by fascination, and Laura begs her father to get her one of the Indian babies that is being carried in a cradle-board attached to the pony's load:

she looked deep down into the blackness of that little baby's eyes, and she wanted that one little baby. 'Pa,' she said, 'get me that little Indian baby!' 'Hush, Laura!' Pa told her sternly. The little baby was going by. Its head turned and its eyes kept looking into Laura's eyes. 'Oh, I want it! I want it!' Laura begged.⁵⁷

Laura views the baby as something to be owned, something her father can simply 'get'. Whilst neither her father nor her mother heeds her request, she is chastised for wanting an Indian baby, rather than for regarding the Indian people as property. Whilst the settler approach to land ownership is condoned in *Little House*, in *Pocahontas* it is given a more critical reading as a result of one of the most significant differences in representation between *Little House* and *Pocahontas* - the voice afforded to the Native people.

The newly discovered America is viewed by the English soldiers as something to be owned; when the ship comes ashore, two men comment: "It's beautiful [...] And it's all ours."⁵⁸ The gold rush that has led the English to Virginia implies from the beginning that the motivation behind the new settlement is domination and greed, and this is further evident in John Smith's speech to Pocahontas about the New World. 'We'll show your people how to use this land –

⁵⁷ Wilder, *Little House*, pp. 205-6.

⁵⁸ *Pocahontas*, dir. by Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg (Walt Disney Pictures, 1995), [on DVD], Scene 9.

make the most of it [...] We'll build roads, and decent houses [...] You don't know any better. There's so much we can teach you - we've improved the lives of savages all over the world."⁵⁹ The attitude of the settlers in this scene suggests that the Native American way of life is inferior, the traditional dwellings 'indecent', and it imposes imperial power retrospectively – at the time, Native and white cultures were much more equal.

Pocahontas, through her interaction with John Smith, functions as a spokesperson for the Indian people. Introduced as a spirited, confident young woman, she argues with her father over whom she should marry, seeking wisdom from Grandmother Willow, a talking tree, and her companions, a hummingbird and a racoon. To some extent, just as some potential for the exploration of sovereignty is proffered and then quashed in *Little House*, any real exploration of Powhatan culture that frames Pocahontas' actions is reduced to caricature and fantasy. It is primarily through the song 'Colours of the Wind' that Pocahontas is able to offer an alternative view to that of the colonisers. The lines 'You think you own whatever land you land on / The earth is just a dead thing you can claim' and 'You think the only people who are people / Are the people who look and think like you'⁶⁰ are the strongest claims to difference in mindset between the Native Americans and white settlers, repeating the reversal of the binary to portray the settlers as the real 'savages'. As with *Little House*, the enduring legacy of *Pocahontas* reinforces the need for indigenous-authored portrayals of life that eschew binary distinctions and rather present affirming images of indigenous culture.

Cornel Pewewardy comments that: "There is no such thing as a real Indian, only Hollywood-created images of past tense Indians. 'Real Indians' are a figment of the

⁵⁹ Ibid, Scene 14.

⁶⁰ Stephen Schwartz, 'Colours of the Wind', (Walt Disney Pictures, 1995)

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monocultural American psyche."⁶¹ This Disney film is rife with 'Hollywood-created images', with Pocahontas seen as an Indian 'Disney' princess - kind, loving and generous, whom young girls might aspire to be, replicated in merchandise that enables children to absorb themselves in this fantasy. It is inescapable, though, that this is a distortion of a truly sad story that in real life doesn't have a happy ending, and which most young children will know nothing about. The ascendant popularity of children's fiction amongst children and adults as well as the potential for images to endure creates the cultural and artistic cross-section into which Erdrich speaks. The limited, and limiting, portrayals of Native Americans in popular culture, exemplified here in Wilder and Disney, are challenged by Erdrich who writes an indigenous history onto the literary landscape mapped out by her predecessors.

Reader Response Theory and Historical Fiction

This thesis is concerned with the ways in which the readers of these novels will come to understand Anishinaabe culture, and so will now consider some of the theories of reader-response criticism in relation to the texts. In the widest sense, reader-response theory suggests that each child will bring to the text their own interpretations and personal background, making each reading of the text unique. Children may therefore 'read' a stereotype differently depending on their own cultural background, their level of education, and what other educational materials are available to them at the time. Wolfgang Iser suggests there are two 'extremes' of interpretation: "either the literary world seems fantastic, because it contradicts our own experience, or it seems trivial, because it merely echoes our own."⁶² By this logic,

⁶¹ Cornel Pewewardy, 'Fluff and Feathers: Treatment of American Indians in Literature and the Classroom' *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 31.1, (April 1998), 69-76, pp. 70-71.

⁶² Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 7.

Erdrich's novels, when read by non-Native children, would be considered 'fantastic' as they largely *differ* from the experience of European culture, and this would suggest all historical fiction is 'fantastic' because it is set in a different era and therefore unfamiliar. However, as I have argued, Erdrich's novels draw upon the familiar aspects of family in everyday life to engage the reader in a process of understanding those aspects of Anishinaabe culture which are unfamiliar. The situation of these activities between the familiar and unknown engages the imagination, raises questions, and confronts the reader with gaps in their knowledge or repertoire. Childhood, and childhood reading, in this context is concentrated rather squarely on the acquisition of knowledge. Children build their repertoires of information about the world around them and their experience of a text varies at each reading depending on the additional knowledge that they can apply to their understanding of the story.

Both Stanley Fish and Norman Holland comment on the impossibility of generalising about an individual reader's response, as there can be no single 'reader.'⁶³ Similarly, Louise Rosenblatt argues that "meaning can be constructed only by drawing on the reader's own personal linguistic and life experiences."⁶⁴ The understanding and interpretation of the texts then, varies depending not only on an individual's cultural knowledge, but also their developmental stage, reading ability, linguistic and textual awareness. Here, the concept of the text as a mirror can be understood on two levels; culturally, in terms of the world presented by the text to the reader, and as Iser argues, one that reflects the reader's own attributes and prejudices as they bring them to their reading of the text: "The manner in which the reader experiences the text will reflect his own disposition, and in this respect the literary text acts as

⁶³ See Stanley E. Fish, 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics,' and Norman N. Holland, 'Unity Identity Text Self,' in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. by Jane P. Tompkins, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 83, 126.

⁶⁴ Louise Rosenblatt, *Making Meaning with Texts*, (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005), p. 7

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a kind of mirror."⁶⁵ This idea is complicated in the presence of a child reader, as, whilst they will have a disposition to bring to the text, and they may have some experience or prejudices that will be reflected in their reading, children are in a position of submissiveness to the text, and may still be forming opinions about other cultures – this may even be their first encounter with a text written by someone of another culture or featuring a Native protagonist.

The same is true for adult readers of these texts who may have their views and assumptions challenged, particularly if long-held views about Native culture have been informed by negative or derogatory stereotypes. Indeed, it is generally adults who control the purchase of texts and object to their inclusion in curricula and public libraries. The novels in question, then, have the potential to work on various levels with different audiences, being read and understood differently by each reader based on their previous knowledge and experience. The texts, as well as offering 'mirrors' of culture and experience, also act as windows – mediating and shaping the culture that they portray.

To return to the child reader, one key way in which the texts work is to offer mirrors and windows into the lives of children from the same or different cultures and places. Mendoza and Reese suggest:

A child may see his or her own life reflected in a book or may have an opportunity to see into someone else's life. Historically, children's books have given European American middle- and upper-class children the mirror but not the window. They could see themselves in the stories they read and heard, but they were unlikely to see anyone much different from themselves. Conversely, children outside the mainstream have had few literary mirrors that affirm their identities, although they had plenty of windows on life in the dominant culture of the United States.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach' in *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. by Jane P. Tompkins, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980) 50-69, (pp. 56-7).

⁶⁶ Mendoza and Reese, 'Examining Multicultural Picture Books for the Early Childhood Classroom'.

This highlights the significance of Erdrich's children's fiction as a mirror that can affirm the identity of an Anishinaabe child, and indicates that Iser's theory of the process of reading should be adapted for a child reader as they may be looking for affirmation in a text, and would not necessarily be 'bored' by reading about familiar things. Children are constantly learning about the world around them as their own sense of identity develops.

Donald Biskin and Kenneth Hoskisson assert that children can be thought of as 'moral philosophers' and, following Kohlberg's stages of moral development, they argue that children's literature is an ideal means by which children develop the ability to make moral judgements – by considering the moral judgements made by characters in a text. They argue that moral reasoning requires experience and interaction with dilemmas, and that children's fiction can partly operate as a means to that end.⁶⁷ As such, the content and diversity of children's literature takes on further significance as a formative process of developing moral reasoning. Daniel Heath Justice argues that written words "are a meaningful complement to the healing processes of decolonisation and Indigenous empowerment," and diverse children's literature is surely one such instance of this.⁶⁸ The texts that provide a 'mirror' by reflecting the background and culture of the reader will affirm their sense of cultural identity and create a stable location from which the child can view the world and interpret texts as an adult.

Erdrich's novels place the trials and tribulations of growing up within a traditional Anishinaabe context, and importantly, a historical one. Roberts suggests that "both anecdotal and empirical evidence exist that non-Indian children overwhelmingly believe that American Indians either no longer exist today or that they live in a strictly (and stereotypical) traditional

⁶⁷ Donald Biskin and Kenneth Hoskisson, 'Moral Development through Children's Literature,' *The Elementary School Journal*, 75.3 (1974), pp. 152-157, pp. 154 & 156.

⁶⁸ Daniel Heath Justice, 'Introduction: Conjuring Marks: Furthering Indigenous Empowerment through Literature,' *American Indian Quarterly*, 28.1&2, (2004), pp. 3-11, p. 5.

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manner far removed from the children's own lives."⁶⁹ Therefore whilst the books may not represent a modern Native American lifestyle, they nonetheless inscribe traditional values and a counterpoint to the dominant Western narrative of colonisation. In the introduction, I discussed the limitations of the designation 'historical fiction', arguing in support of Caroline Rosenthal and Seema Kurup's reconceptualization of the series as historiographic metafiction. However, to many critics, the novels are considered historical fiction, and this chapter now considers the popularity and possibilities of historical fiction within the field of children's literature.

Kim Wilson has carried out a critical study of the Scholastic Press Historical Journal Series which have been published in several countries including the UK, the US, and Australia. Her rationale was that a critical evaluation was needed "because of the journals' propensity to be considered by their readership as truthful historical texts."⁷⁰ The diary format gives the reader a more intimate connection to the story being told, and by their blending of fact and fiction the diaries become "effective vehicles to promote values and attitudes pertinent to the formation and perpetuation of a national identity."⁷¹ Joanne Brown supports this when she suggests that for writers and historians, "meaning lies not in a chain of events themselves but in the writer's interpretation of what occurred."⁷² So by emphasising, promoting and rewarding certain desired national values and characteristics in their protagonists, writers of historical fiction have tremendous potential to shape present day attitudes and beliefs about national character, by 'reminding' them of past victories, past values, and past customs. If historical

⁶⁹ Roberts, Dean and Holland, 'Contemporary American Indian Cultures', (2005), p. 1-2.

⁷⁰ Kim Wilson, 'Are They Telling Us the Truth? Constructing National Character in the Scholastic Press Historical Journal Series', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 32.2 (2007), 129-141, p. 129.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 130.

⁷² Joanne Brown, 'Historical Fiction or Fictionalised History? Problems for Writers of Historical Novels for Young Adults', *The ALAN Review*, 26.1, (Autumn 1998), p. 3.

fiction can be such a vehicle for inculcating a dominant national identity in the minds of young readers, then it is also an invaluable style of writing about the past for those voices that are often marginalised by the dominant historical narrative. As Katharine Capshaw Smith suggests: "Children's texts are often intensely dialogic; they interact with biased versions of the past that have previously been fortified within the classroom setting."⁷³ Erdrich's novels join this dialogic process of negotiating past realities and reinstating an indigenous perspective within the historical fiction/fictionalised history genre.

The idea of 'otherness' is key to understanding some of the reasons why historical fiction faces scrutiny and is often accused of bias. There is tremendous scope to literally 'whitewash' the past - Melissa Kay Thompson argues that the Scholastic journal series "perpetuate 'White cultural dominance'"⁷⁴ and Donnarae MacCann scathingly comments that what is promoted as "fact-based history is really America congratulating itself."⁷⁵ The pitfalls of historical fiction are surely this. If one assumes the author has a responsibility toward their readership, then in the case of historical fiction for children, there is an implicit trust in the author to tell the truth. However, as Brown argues, the significance of the historical events being portrayed and the meaning that both the author and the reader will inscribe to them are subject to myriad influences that the author and reader will bring to the text. As Hunt states: "In the process of making meaning with a particular text, we know that children [...] have recourse to a battery of intertextual phenomena."⁷⁶ It is this concept of bringing past experience to a text that makes counter-hegemonic narratives like Erdrich's so significant and

⁷³ Katharine Capshaw Smith, 'The Landscape of Ethnic American Children's Literature,' *MELUS*, 27.2 (2002), pp. 3-8, p. 6.

⁷⁴ Melissa Kay Thompson, 'A Sea of Good Intentions: Native Americans in Books for Children', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 25.3, (2001), 353-374, p. 354.

⁷⁵ Donnarae MacCann, 'The Sturdy Fabric of Cultural Imperialism: Tracing its Patterns in Contemporary Children's Novels', *Children's Literature*, 33 (2005) 185-208, p. 196.

⁷⁶ Hunt, *Understanding Children's Literature*, p. 170.

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so necessary. By becoming part of a child's reading experience, stories like that of Omakayas will hopefully become part of their ideas about the world and inform their interpretations of future texts.

Erdrich achieves through her fiction a portrayal of the past that gives Native American children what Sutcliffe describes as "a sense of continuity in time and history, and some awareness of their roots behind them, to help them understand where they came from and where they are going to."⁷⁷ She achieves this by creating relatable characters that are showing the reader a way of life grounded in traditional Anishinabe values and practices. Her fiction does not function completely as a literary mirror, in that it does not attempt to portray contemporary Native life, but it does reflect those Anishinabe values and practices that will be recognisable to a Native audience. The presenting of those values has tremendous potential to impact on the future of Native people and on the attitudes of those around them. Joanne Brown states of reading historical novels: "we are reminded again and again that the issues of the past are inscribed on our own lives, that yesterday continues to impinge upon today."⁷⁸ This is true of the events that Erdrich portrays so far in her novels – the removal of tribes from their land, the expansion West, and the gradual decline in indigenous languages are still topics of grievance today.

Throughout the novels, Erdrich shows how the interactions between the Ojibwe and settler communities shaped events. In the second book of the series, *The Game of Silence*, Erdrich describes one of the commonly known interactions between Native Americans and white settlers – that of treaties and broken agreements:

⁷⁷ Rosemary Sutcliffe, 'History and Time', in *Historical Fiction for Children: Capturing the Past*, ed. by Fiona Collins and Judith Graham, (London: Fulton, 2001), p. 233.

⁷⁸ Brown, 'Historical Fiction or Fictionalised History?', (1998), p. 7.

Memory was Ojibwe writing. Things were not forgotten that way. Something about the black marks had gone wrong, Omakayas knew that. The black marks promised one thing, but the chimookomanag [white people] wanted to break that promise.⁷⁹

By drawing on well-known events and practices Erdrich is able to re-inscribe history from an Ojibwe perspective. The example of treaty-writing is particularly significant as it is the basis for the relationship between settlers and Native peoples, and it is of course, one of the tools used by the government of the time to take ancestral lands away from the indigenous people. In her novels Erdrich portrays an intelligent people, forced to learn to write in English in order to negotiate with the government for their land.

Michelle Stewart applies Catherine Rainwater's concept of 'counting coup' to Erdrich's *Birchbark House* series, an idea which I think is worth explaining here. Much scholarly discussion has centred around the idea of indigenous peoples 'writing back' to the dominant narrative, but Rainwater takes the military concept of earning a 'coup' or honour in battle which was awarded if a warrior could get close enough to the enemy to touch him or his belongings and applies it to fiction. She argues that American Indian fiction is using the semiotic 'property' of the Other to reclaim its subject position and become critically instructive, rather than being objectified and defined from a Western perspective. This process "ultimately enables contemporary American Indian authors to transform the way non-Natives who read these seminal works may henceforth approach texts about and by Native Americans."⁸⁰ This approach to fiction corresponds with the ideas mentioned earlier about the power of historical fiction to shape reader's beliefs about events.

⁷⁹ Erdrich, *The Game of Silence*, p. 20.

⁸⁰ Michelle Pagni Stewart, "'Counting Coup' on Children's Literature about American Indians: Louise Erdrich's Historical Fiction", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 38.2 (2013), 215-235, p. 216, see also Catherine Rainwater, *Dreams of Fiery Stars: The Transformations of Native American Fiction* (Philadelphia: U. Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

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Historical fiction, or in this case, fictionalised history, often says more about the present than the past it describes, and this is suggested by Wilson who argues that desired twenty-first century national values can be disseminated through texts that primarily portray the past. It follows, then, that reading Erdrich's novels as fictionalised history actually enhances the claim that they are an act of presencing, if they are understood to be reflecting contemporary Anishinaabe values within a historical context, temporally drawing the reader towards an Anishinaabe present. One of the ways this is achieved is through the use of the Anishinaabemowin language.

The issue of language is one that Erdrich addresses positively in her novels, as I have alluded to in the introduction. By integrating Anishinaabemowin words into the text with some in-text translation and some meaning inferred from context, readers are able to pick up key words throughout the novels. There is a glossary at the end of each novel to explain each word in full with phonetic spelling. As the books are read, the language, embedded in the narrative, becomes increasingly familiar, known and understood. As a result, these texts can be understood as an act of cultural presencing, as I argue, but also an act of linguistic presencing that connects the novels to present-day efforts to revitalise both culture and language. It is estimated that there are fewer than one thousand Ojibwe speakers in the U.S.A, though there are more in Canada, and projects concerned with language revitalisation are working to increase literacy in Native languages across the United States.⁸¹ Most of the speakers of Ojibwe in the U.S are in Minnesota, and as Anton Treuer points out, language and culture go hand in hand. He gives the example of how there are only a handful of fluent speakers who can conduct traditional funerals in Ojibwe country. The Minnesota Legislature has provided funding to

⁸¹ For more information about the Ojibwe language, see 'The Ojibwe People's Dictionary.' Available at <<https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu>>

teach Ojibwe and Dakota languages in schools to raise fluency amongst young people and it is hoped that this kind of work can continue to revitalise the language. The influence of literature on the preservation of language and culture is described by Nancy Hadaway and Terence Young, who argue:

As indigenous language is endangered, cultural heritage is also threatened, and literature may be seen as one permanent means of recording both language and culture.⁸²

By naturalising the Ojibwe language within her novels Erdrich not only creates texts which are true to the past, but also texts which will play a valuable part in language revitalisation efforts amongst young Ojibwe today.

Through the *Birchbark House* series, the reader's understanding of contemporary Ojibwe identity is constructed mainly through an enhanced understanding of the past, and importantly, the persistence of those same values and customs that continue to shape Anishinaabe life. This chapter has explored the potential of children's literature and particularly, historical fiction, to transform attitudes and show how through careful evocation of Ojibwe history Erdrich is able to transform widely-held preconceptions about Native Americans and so begin to impact on that "battery of inter-textual phenomena" that children and adults bring to the texts they read.

⁸² Nancy Hadaway and Terrell Young, 'Celebrating and Revitalising Language: Indigenous Bilingual Children's Books', *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, 51.3 (2013), 56-68, p. 58.

Land and Environment

There is a rich history and discourse surrounding the issue of what can be termed indigenous land rights in North America – encompassing ownership, farming, the division of natural resources and their use for commercial gain. One only has to consider the protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) over the course of 2016, to gain some understanding that this is not an issue that has gone away, nor is it going to. Native American activism, which began to mobilise in earnest in the 1960s, continues to this day. The proposed pipeline connects the Bakken oil fields of North Dakota with a shipping port in Illinois, passing through South Dakota and Iowa en route. The protest focuses on Lake Oahe, on the standing Rock Sioux reservation, under which there are eight pipelines already running. It is feared that the construction of a ninth, larger pipeline will threaten the reservation's water supply by putting it at greater risk of spillage and contamination, as well as harming sacred sites and infringing on traditional ritual practices which require clean water. The protests against the pipeline have drawn activists and supporters together, both Native and non-Native, to camp at the site of the protest for over a year, before being forcibly removed in February 2017. In March 2017, a 'march in prayer and action' took place in Washington, D.C along with a four-day symbolic tipi gathering next to the Washington monument.

In a piece for the New York Times, Erdrich describes her experience at Standing Rock as one that reaffirms the need to "preserve land, water, the precious democracy that is our pride," placing the pipe-line protest at the end of a series of struggles that include the Battle of Wounded Knee. There is a keen sense of tradition here, too, which underscores the idea

that the DAPL protest is about far more than an access pipe. It is directly related to the abuses of power that have caused suffering and dispossession to Native Americans since settlement began. Erdrich points out that Lake Oahe, around which the conflict is centred, is in itself a reminder of displacement, being a man-made lake that forced tribal people to relocate when the project to build a dam was given approval in 1948.¹ Erdrich has intervened in land claims before, visiting the White Earth reservation and writing a feature for the *New York Times* to coincide with the publication of *Tracks*, her adult novel which thematises the allotment of Indian land and related indigenous land rights.

Standing Rock is just one recent example of grassroots activism. In Canada, the movement 'Idle No More' was started by a group of four women using Twitter to protest bills that would cut federal protection of waterways and fisheries, many on First Nation territory, opening them up to commercial resource mining. The organisation has declared solidarity with the Standing Rock protest. Its website states: "Idle No More seeks to assert Indigenous inherent rights to sovereignty and reinstitute traditional laws and Nation to Nation Treaties by protecting the lands and waters from corporate destruction."² The desire to be recognized as indigenous nations is replicated across North America as this current period of activism focuses on tribal sovereignty, the honouring of treaties and the protection of land and environment from destructive commercial practices.

Against this background, this chapter will explore the history of North American Indigenous peoples' ties to land and will aim to situate the Birchbark House series within the wider discourse of treaty negotiation and land rights. For the purposes of this chapter the term 'land' will encompass the physical environment and its natural resources, including vegetation,

¹ Louise Erdrich, 'How to Stop a Black Snake', *New York Times*, 10 December 2016, <<https://nyti.ms/2hyhZed>>

² Idle No More, 'The Story', available at <<http://www.idlenomore.ca/story>>

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as per the definition given by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations.³ This definition includes the effects of human activity, which is important when considering the impact of human manipulation of natural resources in the context of indigenous-settler interaction. However, this is a Euro-American definition, and this chapter will show how Erdrich engages with, but pushes back against Western conceptions of land, to give readers an indigenous sense of land and the importance of place. Where the term environment is used it refers to a broader sense of the natural and man-made landscape and takes into account habitats, animals, and urban areas, with the focus being on the network of relationships that it comprises. This is most relevant to the texts when we consider later in the chapter the place of animals, spirituality, and the interconnectedness of living entities.

The importance of place within Native studies has been explored by many authors and critics, and this chapter is particularly interested in Anishinaabe conceptions of space and place in relation to spirituality, land use, and home. In Keith Basso's influential work on place, he suggests that

relationships with places are lived whenever a place becomes the object of awareness [...] it is when individuals step back from the flow of everyday experience and attend self-consciously to places [...] that their relationships to geographical space are most richly lived and surely felt.⁴

Within the *Birchbark House* novels, the privileging of space and place as tropes throughout the narrative engenders a self-conscious consideration and reflection on space and the characters' relationship to it. The novels cover a sequence of migrations that emphasise a reciprocal relationship between the Ojibwe and the environment. Beginning on the island of the golden-

³ Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations, 'Chapter 2: Basic Concepts', in 'A Framework for Land Evaluation', *FAO Soils Bulletin*, 32, (1976), available at: <<http://www.fao.org/docrep/x5310e/x5310e03.htm#2.2%20land>>

⁴ Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), loc. 1923 (kindle edition).

breasted woodpecker, or Moningwanaykaning, and ending on the Great Plains in Dakota territory, the meta-narrative engages in a process of coming to terms with 'home', tradition, displacement and relocation. This chapter will argue that a reading of the texts foregrounding the role of land and environment allows for a deeper understanding of the Anishinaabe culture that Erdrich portrays and the development of the characters within the landscape that they call home. In turn, this understanding sheds light on ongoing struggles for land rights and tribal sovereignty in the twenty-first century, and Erdrich's commitment to these causes.

Land Use and Spirituality

There is a persistent image of Native Americans as the 'first environmentalists', and in the latter part of the twentieth century as David Lewis explains,

whites embraced Indians, or their cherished image, as symbols for the counterculture, American environmentalism, New Age spirituality and mysticism – symbols for a way of life in opposition to an urban, white, Christian, techno-industrial society.⁵

This kind of fetishising of Native American environmentalism and spiritualism can be considered another kind of displacement through commodification, as historical practices and beliefs are appropriated to fit a preconceived image of white protest. Michael Brown asserts that "indigenous peoples now perceive themselves as more threatened by outsiders who claim to love their religion than by missionaries dedicated to its overthrow," suggesting that the adoption and replication of Native religious practices dilute their authenticity.⁶ This in turn affects indigenous rights and land claims by refusing to recognise distinct nation groups with

⁵ David Rich Lewis, 'Still Native: The Significance of Native Americans in the History of the Twentieth-Century American West', *The Western Historical Quarterly*, 24.2 (May 1993), 203-227, p. 221.

⁶ Michael Brown, *Who Owns Native Culture?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 23.

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complex histories and cultures. Furthermore, the ways in which Native American spirituality is connected to beliefs about land use and environment makes the appropriation of one or both of these aspects a form of colonial ‘othering’, as it perpetuates stereotypes and renders diverse indigenous culture as spectacle.⁷ In 2016, the author J. K. Rowling was accused of this kind of appropriation for her portrayal of Native Americans in the series *Magic in North America*, published on her website ‘Pottermore’. Native scholars and critics responded to her writing in ways that directly link Rowling’s descriptions to their impact on indigenous representation and land rights, as scholar Amy H. Sturgis (of Cherokee descent) told *The Huffington Post*:

Some of her descriptions — the claim that the Native American wizarding community was ‘particularly gifted in animal and plant magic’ for instance — refer less to Native American cultural traditions than to stereotypes of the mystical Noble Savage that have been used for centuries by non-Natives to make Native Americans seem exotic and Other.⁸

Adrienne Keene (Cherokee), on her blog ‘Native Appropriations’, expressed fear that sacred sites were being put at risk by Rowling’s appropriation and misrepresentation of indigenous spirituality:

We are also fighting everyday for the protection of our sacred sites from being destroyed by mining, fracking, and other forms of “development.” These sites are sacred. Meaning they have deep roots in our spiritual beliefs, hold sacred power, and connect us to our ancestors. If Indigenous spirituality becomes conflated with fantasy “magic”— how can we expect lawmakers and the public to be allies in the protection of these spaces?⁹

⁷ Cultural appropriation as a form of othering occurs when indigenous customs are appropriated which fit an homogenised ‘ideal’ that is used to define the subject according to the coloniser. See M. L. Pratt, ‘Scratches on the face of the country; or what Mr Barrow saw in the land of the bushmen.’, *Critical Enquiry*, 12.1 (Autumn 1985), 138-162, p. 139.

⁸ Claire Fallon, ‘What J.K. Rowling’s New Story Can Teach Us About Cultural Appropriation’, *The Huffington Post*, 18 March 2016 (updated 18 January 2017), <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/jk-rowling-native-appropriation_us_56eac8ace4b0860f99dbb98e>

⁹ Adrienne Keene, “‘Magic in North America’: The Harry Potter franchise veers too close to home”, *Native Appropriations*, 7 March 2016, <<http://nativeappropriations.com/2016/03/magic-in-north-america-the-harry-potter-franchise-veers-too-close-to-home.html>>

What both of these responses show is the tangible effect of colonial misrepresentation on ongoing, present, and vital indigenous issues. Keene is explicit about the connection between land and spirituality, and the need for both to be recognised as related by policy-makers, those who are responding to issues like DAPL and to movements like Idle No More.

In her comparative study of indigenous children's literature, Clare Bradford writes that: "although children's texts by indigenous authors do not often directly thematise contemporary struggles for land rights, they are preoccupied with the cultural meanings of place and their significances for Indigenous identity formation."¹⁰ Children's books such as *The Birchbark House* draw the reader's attention to indigenous issues by portraying the experiences of colonisation in fictionalised history. Erdrich's novels foreground the link between environment and Omakayas' developing identity, and in this chapter I will argue that by doing so she draws attention to land rights, the novel becoming a site of socio-political commentary. The trajectory of Erdrich's narrative bears this out as Omakayas occupies the parallel spaces 'in-between' childlike and adult states, and in-between pre-colonial and colonised states.

Erdrich's narrative is also representative of what Homi Bhabha describes as the 'past-present' – a work of art that "does not merely recall the past as social cause [...] it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living."¹¹ Another 'in-between' space then, the past as Erdrich creates it in this novel interrupts the present by reminding all who read it of the policies of removal, of white settlement, and of the eventual destruction of the Native American way of life as it was prior

¹⁰ Clare Bradford, *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Readings of Children's Literature* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007), p. 177.

¹¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 10.

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to first contact. This claim for ‘in-betweenness’ sits uneasily alongside this thesis’ claims for tribal specificity, especially in light of the critical split between tribal nationalists – like Jace Weaver, Craig Womack and Robert Warrior who argue for a “hermeneutics based on fiction’s ability to reflect the intellectual, imaginative, and political sovereignty of the Native American tribes” – and Arnold Krupat, Kenneth Lincoln, and Elvira Pulitano who argue that Native American narratives are intercultural and hybridised.¹² Despite this uneasiness, I argue that configuring the past so as to interrupt the present (drawing attention to past injustices, and present erasure) can be understood, in terms of fictionalised history, to *support* a tribal nationalist theory of literature because it is re-inscribing a tribally-specific historical narrative onto a settler-colonial literary landscape. However, it does so from an inevitable point of hybridity, since it is written in English by a German-Ojibwe author and forms part of a broader twenty-first century Native/American canon of children’s fiction.

The historian David Rich Lewis asserts that for Native Americans, the earth and its occupants are considered “animate, sentient and connected through the power of creation.”¹³ The sentience and connectedness of the earth and its occupants is clear from the outset of the first novel. Omakayas herself has a name meaning “little frog”, introduced as the “girl from spirit island.” The naming linkage of the main protagonist with animals and spirits sets the pattern for the story ahead, immersing the reader immediately in a world where creatures, spirits and humans are interconnected and interdependent. The extent to which living things are regarded as sacred is introduced in the first chapter, with the preparation of the birchbark for making the house of the title. As discussed in the next chapter on ‘Home’, Erdrich pays a great deal of attention to the provenance of materials and the sensitivity with which they are

¹² Padraig Kirwan, “‘All the Talk and All the Silence’”: Literary Aesthetics and Cultural Boundaries in David Treuer’s *Little’s Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 44.3 (2011), pp. 444-465, p. 445.

¹³ David Rich Lewis, ‘Still Native’, (1993), p. 209.

acquired. In the sequence in which Omakayas and her grandmother take the bark from the tree, Nokomis is described as having "leathery paw-like hands" with which she feels the tree trunk for flaws. Later, as Omakayas escapes a chore by wriggling under the flaps of the birchbark, she is described as "like a small, striped snake, like a salamander, or a squirrel maybe, or a raccoon, something quick, little, harmless and desperate."¹⁴ The use of similes such as these reinforce the idea that Omakayas and the other humans are part of a wider circle of creatures and living things. In contrast to the Christian settlers who separated spirit and nature, the Ojibwe are portrayed by Erdrich as people who believe that spirit and nature are inseparable. A little later in the first novel, baby Neewo (Omakayas' youngest sibling) is only yet named by a word meaning 'fourth' to indicate his position in the order of siblings:

The tiny boy was a spirit, so far, who had come to live here and was deciding whether or not to stay. Grandma told Omakayas to be careful with him, little baby Neewo, because he might decide to go back to the other place if he thought his big sister was mean.¹⁵

The conceptualisation of Neewo-as-spirit has renewed significance at the end of the novel after he succumbs to the smallpox virus that consumes the village. Omakayas grieves for her infant brother and is told the story of her beginnings, and the sparrows that protected her, alone on Spirit Island. In the sparrow's song that once comforted her, she hears her brother's voice:

Singing, singing, the little birds told her something more. Their delicate song surrounded her, running in waves through the leafless trees [...] Those sweet, tiny far-reaching notes were so brave. The little birds called out repeatedly in the cold dawn air, and all of a sudden Omakayas heard something new in their voices. She heard Neewo. She heard her little brother as though he still existed in the world. She heard him tell her to cheer up and live. I'm all right, his voice was saying, I'm in a peaceful place. You can depend on me. I'm always here to help you, my sister. Omakayas tucked

¹⁴ Louise Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, (New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1999, repr. 2002), pp. 7, 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 37.

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her hands behind her head, lay back, closed her eyes, and smiled as the song of the white-throated sparrow sank again and again through the air like a shining needle, and sewed up her broken heart.¹⁶

The connection of Neewo's voice to the sparrows makes a strong link between Ojibwe human spirits and the natural world. Omakayas' brother is part of the unseen world made visible by living creatures — a spiritual helper. The notion of strength and bravery being found in small things is repeated in the novel, *Chickadee*, in which the birth of Omakayas' twin sons is recounted. Chickadee is named for the tiny singing bird that flies into the camp during the birth and takes up his perch next to Omakayas for the duration of her labour.

Erdrich's novels privilege and naturalise the relationship between humans and the environment but always, as with Neewo, with the acknowledgement and understanding that such encounters/relationships are equal, beneficial, and temporary. The animals of the novels - Andeg, the crow, Pinch's porcupine, Old Tallow's dogs, Omakayas' dog - all become recognisable as pets and seem to operate within the story as a friend or helper, the kind of relationship that helps the protagonists to realise something new about themselves. When the crow, Andeg, flies away, Omakayas rationalises her loss in such a way that demonstrates an understanding of who she is. As a plot device, it summarises the bildungsroman into a few short sentences:

Andeg stole and hoarded bits of bright cloth and shiny metal shards, he wasn't a human, he was still a crow, and she couldn't change that. She couldn't change that any more than she could change being who she was, Omakayas, who heard the voices of plants and went dizzy. Omakayas, who talked to bear boys and received their medicine. Omakayas, who missed her one brother and resented the other, who envied her sister. Omakayas, the Little Frog, whose first step was a hop. Omakayas who'd lost her friend.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 238-239.

¹⁷ Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, pp. 218-219

Here, Omakayas' personal development is linked to her relationship with the pet crow, and her understanding that that relationship is temporary, bound by the inevitability of the crow's needs. Her ability to 'hear the plants' and 'talk to bear boys' are connected to her role as a healer, making the interconnectedness between the natural world and the human one of deep spirituality that affects physical survival. Margaret Noodin describes the relationship with nature that Erdrich portrays as 'infinite and seamless', one of 'total interdependence'. The characters "find in the grass, the logs, the leaves, and the birdsongs a source of peace, a voice that answers questions and satisfies needs."¹⁸ Furthermore, the birdsong motif is repeated in the fourth novel, which builds up Chickadee's understanding of the power in his namesake, the tiny grey and black bird. After initially mocking his namesake because it is small and powerless, he is kidnapped, runs away, and is trying to find his way home. He calls out for help, and the tiny bird appears and teaches the boy a song:

Chickadee learned the song. It was a short song, as all real Ojibwe songs are [...] He sang it over and over with his we'eh, his father and protector [...] Whenever he wobbled and felt that he could not go on, he sang the song he'd been given. The song became his own song very quickly. It gave him strength. He could feel the words flow through him and his legs moved with purpose.¹⁹

As with the earlier passage from *The Birchbark House*, Erdrich's characters find solace in birdsong and in interaction with spirit helpers, often with very direct connection to physical wellbeing. Following instructions from the chickadee, Chickadee finds water and food, and protection in the form of hawks who promise to help him.

¹⁸ Margaret Noodin, *Bawaajimo: A Dialect of Dreams in Anishinaabe Language and Literature*, (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2014), pp. 56-57.

¹⁹ Louise Erdrich, *Chickadee*, (New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 2012), p. 115.

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Land Use and Indian Policy

Understanding the reciprocity and relational nature of the Ojibwe people's treatment of the land is key to recognising the stark contrast between indigenous and settler approaches to land use in the early nineteenth century. According to Joy Porter, the theft of Indian land was "rationalised as good business," an idea that stemmed from the misinterpretation of Indian hunting practices as a leisure pursuit – something that was only practised in Europe by the wealthy nobility.

The perceived underutilisation of the land led to the justification of Indian displacement by settlers on the basis that "English know-how could develop what was woefully underutilised to the benefit of all."²⁰ Fear of the 'corruption' of settlers by the Indian way of life, and the evident attraction of some early settlers to Indian *mino-bimaadiziwin*, or, 'the good life', contributed to the designation of Indians as wild, savage, and lazy as the government sought to maintain the separation of settlers and natives, imposing a seemingly impenetrable boundary between the two. The Anglo-American characterisation of intermarriage as a descent into savagery is unpacked by Erdrich who shows the border as a place of exchange between cultures. Political influence for perpetuating this image of Indians can be found in President Andrew Jackson's address to Congress defending the Indian Removal Act, in which he describes Indians as "savage hunters" and "wandering savages" who should be grateful for the promise of "new and extensive territory" in return for their ancestral home. Jackson also

²⁰ Joy Porter, *Native American Environmentalism: Land, Spirit and the Idea of Wilderness* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), p. 62.

perpetuates the motif of the “vanishing Indian” when he describes tribes who once populated the Eastern States as “annihilated or have melted away to make room for the whites.”²¹

This is echoed in Laura Ingalls Wilder's novel, *Little House on the Prairie* in which Ma says: “Land knows, they'd never do anything with this country themselves. All they do is roam around over it like wild animals. Treaties or no treaties, the land belongs to folks that'll farm it.”²² The assumption that an unrecognisable system of land management was tantamount to roaming like wild animals can be seen in historical accounts of the period of early settlement, which were often guided by a Christian belief in exercising dominion over the earth. As Alan Taylor puts it:

European Christians insisted that humanity had a divine charge to dominate and exploit the natural world [...] As a result, colonisers regarded as backward and impious any people, like the Indians, who left nature too little altered. By defaulting in their divine duty, such peoples forfeited their title to the earth. They could justly be conquered and dispossessed by Europeans who would exploit lands and animals to their fullest potential.²³

According to Taylor, spirituality and the land are explicitly linked for both settler and native with opposing results. Louise Erdrich portrays a world in which nature is ‘little altered’ by humans, directly as a result of spiritual beliefs in the sentience and interconnectedness of all things. The discovery that land was unchartered and unfarmed rendered it, in the eyes of the colonisers, unused or possibly, mis-used. The irony in this assumption is that the accusation of ‘mis-use’ of land can just as easily be applied to the appropriation and exhaustion of resources

²¹ President Jackson's Message to Congress “On Indian Removal”, 6 December 1830; Records of the United States Senate, 1789-1990; Record Group 46; Records of the United States Senate, 1789-1990; National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)

²² Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Little House on the Prairie* (Middlesex: Puffin, 1964), p. 142.

²³ Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 20-21.

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by settlers during the colonial period, something that Erdrich touches upon in the fifth book, *Makoons* which I will discuss later in the chapter in the section on hunting.

The justification for colonisation based on perceptions of land use is also explored by Michael Witgen who describes the ‘fantasy’ on which the United States of America was founded:

The two faces of savagery – brutality and nobility – explained the disappearance of the Native peoples of North America, and the triumphant rise of the United States... the land itself shares a destiny with the American people. The United States of America, a new form of civilisation, can be called into existence only when its people are able to transform the land, to improve it, by making it into farms and cities, and converting the wealth of nature into property.²⁴

Crucial to the treatment of Native Americans and the land is the concept of the savage. Used as Witgen suggests, to denote either brutality or nobility, it provided justification for colonisation and alleviated guilt on the part of the settler by associating indigenous practices with non-Christian values and implying that the so-called disappearance of Native populations was part of the manifest destiny that would allow the United States to flourish. The concept of the noble savage is perpetuated in wider American literature of the nineteenth century, most notably in the novels of James Fenimore Cooper.

Complicating these notions of the indigenous savage were the findings of complex social structures and ways of living that confounded the settler-explorers and often led to their designation as wild or savage. As Witgen goes on to say, (referring to the seasonal movement of the people of the Great Lakes and Northern Plains), “the pattern of this movement and the social structure that made it possible resulted in a social adaptability that European observers

²⁴ Michael Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), p. 8.

interpreted as politically unformed and culturally primitive."²⁵ In other words, any form of governance or society that wasn't recognisable within European norms and traditions was disregarded as unenlightened.

Louise Erdrich reverses this idea in the second book of the series, *The Game of Silence*, when Omakayas and her family meet 'Break-Apart Girl', so named for the tight-fitting corset she wears that makes her look as though she would snap in half. Her way of life is met with incredulity from Omakayas, for whom the ideas of drinking milk from a cow, or wearing tight shoes, are unthinkable. Through their friendship, Erdrich shows how the settler way of life was unusual to Omakayas, and yet how the indigenous children embraced the new girl as a friend, conferring pity upon her, rather than ridicule, for her tight-fitting shoes. The interaction of the children offers the potential for a reciprocal relationship between the two groups of people, and this is echoed by the older women in Omakayas' family who welcome the white girl into their home as a friend of their daughter.

One of the significant differences in land use between the settlers and Indians was in the introduction of western farming methods, as expressed in the extract from *Little House on the Prairie* that I discussed earlier in the chapter. The ways in which differing concepts of land use shapes attitudes towards, and treatment of, animals is explored by Erdrich in the encounter between Omakayas and Break-Apart Girl towards the beginning of *The Game of Silence*:

Omakayas pointed back toward the house full of what the Ojibweg called slave animals, the awakaanag, that lived out back of the Break-Apart Girl's house. They went to visit these odd creatures. The cows were slow, sweetly foolish. One of the strange things about the chimookomanag was that they took the cow's milk and drank it – this seemed, at first, disgusting to Omakayas. She hadn't believed such a thing when she first heard about it [...] There were two thick-furred sheep, and chickens. Omakayas

²⁵ Ibid, p. 27.

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very much wanted to have a chicken some day. Nokomis said that keeping these fat silly birds around to steal their eggs was one of the best chimookoman inventions that she knew of yet!²⁶

In this passage Erdrich takes two very commonplace practices that would be well known to her readers — keeping chickens for their eggs, and drinking cow's milk — and through the lens of first contact and discovery is able to show these as unusual, emphasising again and again the difference between cultures and the richness of variety in cultural practices. Later in the novel the 'Break-Apart Girl' is invited to join a sweat lodge and Nokomis (grandmother) remarks that her hat (described as a 'head bucket') would be more useful if it could be used to carry things. By turning to the comic to emphasise cultural difference, Erdrich is able to place the reader in a position of recognising, along with Omakayas, those practices which might appear unusual to an outsider and in so doing challenges the reader to confront their own cultural norms from another perspective. This is achieved particularly through the articulation of shared interests and activities between the two female characters – Omakayas and Break-Apart Girl. As with language, by creating a zone of exchange that is sited in the familiar (for the twenty-first century reader), the practice of keeping chickens, milking cows, and wearing formal shoes and hats becomes in the novel an opportunity for the reader to consider these everyday practices both from an historical perspective and on a cultural level. As discussed in the introduction, this encounter is described by David Stirrup as reductionist in its simplicity, but I argue that it is a clear indication to the child reader of the differences in approach to land use and animal husbandry between the Anishinaabe and settler cultures.

²⁶ Louise Erdrich, *The Game of Silence* (New York: Harper Trophy, 2006), pp. 48-9.

Hunting and Sustainability

One of the most significant ways in which indigenous and settler land use differed was in the management of natural resources for hunting and food, of which the buffalo (Plains bison) is a prime example. The disappearance of the buffalo was partly driven by the need for grazing land for cattle and arable land for crops. Erdrich refers to this in the fifth book of the series, *Makoons*, in which the family have made a home on the Plains and Omakayas' children are learning to hunt buffalo. Now celebrated as the National Mammal of the United States, the creature was near extinction at the turn of the nineteenth century.²⁷ After settler migration drastically reduced their natural habitat, bison herds were decimated. In 1905, Theodore Roosevelt formed the American Bison Society in order to save the species.²⁸ As a key part of indigenous hunting life on the Plains, the buffalo were integral to the sustenance of Native tribes. Andrew Isenberg writes that "between 1870 and 1883, Euro-American hunters slaughtered millions of bison. Federal authorities supported the hunt because they saw the extermination of the bison as a means to force Indians to submit to the reservation system."²⁹ Cutting off the supply of buffalo through over-hunting by settlers would force the indigenous tribes to seek hunting grounds elsewhere. This effective strategy is observed in *Makoons*:

It was hard to admit. The people were reluctant to understand. But it was true – the buffalo were moving west. The great herds would avoid the settlements, the river with its screaming steamboats [...] The rest of the family, along with Little Shell's people, decided to travel to a place further west.³⁰

²⁷ The bison was recognised as the national mammal by President Obama on 9 May 2016.

²⁸ U.S. Department of the Interior, '15 Facts About Our National Mammal: The American Bison' Available at: <<https://www.doi.gov/blog/15-facts-about-our-national-mammal-american-bison>>

²⁹ Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 3.

³⁰ Louise Erdrich, *Makoons* (New York: Harper, 2016), p. 128.

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Throughout *Makoons*, Erdrich continues, as in the first novel, to emphasise the *mino-bimaadiziwin* (the good life) through connections with extended family and interdependency with the environment. The loss of the buffalo causes sorrow amongst the Anishinaabe people, who describe the buffalo as “the generous ones.”³¹

As with their mother before them, Omakayas’ sons Makoons and Chickadee take animals as pets, in this case, a buffalo calf:

When its people had disappeared in the great thunder, and the strange new beings taken their place, all this baby calf could do was squeeze its eyes shut in fear and pretend it was invisible. Now that these beings were feeding and petting him, there was no way the buffalo calf would let them out of sight.³²

The boys become surrogate family to the calf, protecting it during hunts so that it won’t be killed, and taking it to the horse to nurse alongside a lamb. In this portrayal of husbandry, the boys’ attitude towards the calf is one of protection, perhaps driven by pity, and certainly one of affection and care in contrast to the depiction of the settlers’ ‘slave animals’ in *The Game of Silence*, which are kept only for their usefulness. That said, even within the family unit there are differences in opinion about the calf, whom Yellow Kettle would rather kill and use the skin for a tobacco pouch. Throughout the narrative, Erdrich emphasises an attitude of responsibility towards the land that includes, in this instance, the pragmatic opinion that the calf would be more useful to them if they killed it. The boys, however, are horrified, and echo the sensitivity towards animals that Omakayas demonstrated as a child in the earlier novels. Erdrich also tends to refuse a dichotomous depiction of settler and Ojibwe life; instead, some distinctions in attitude are demarcated as childlike or adult, sensible or outrageous, risky or safe. Although

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 118.

³² *Ibid*, p. 69.

the cows and chickens are described as 'slave animals' in *The Game of Silence*, Omakayas leaves her dog with Break-Apart Girl as a pet because she is unable to take him when the family leave their home. This act of trust speaks across extant cultural boundaries and refuses the binary opposition enacted in Wilder's novels, for instance.

The way in which Erdrich treats the land as useful and sustaining throughout her novels is important in countering the view discussed earlier that Indians were lazy, hunted without purpose and did not manage the land. Such views, which served as justification for Indian removal, as we have seen, also contributed to the concept that Indians were so entwined with this pre-contact landscape that they too would be subdued and transformed by colonial farming methods. The ferocity with which European settlers supplanted the natural biodiversity of pre-contact North America is described by Greg Garrard as 'ecocidal', and on the Plains specifically he refers to Crosby's concept of 'ecological imperialism': "the whites brought ploughs, cattle, pigs, tough short-stemmed grasses, European weeds, smallpox, measles and whooping cough and drove out, in a combined ecological assault, Indians, tall grasses, and bison."³³ In this quotation from Garrard, indigenous people are included in an 'ecological' assault; linking them to the landscape as part of the biota. This in turn is a problematic description which makes Indians conceptually inseparable as a distinct people, both in terms of the landscape and in the refusal to acknowledge a complex self-governing structure of tribes and social groups.

In contrast to the destruction of bison and habitat destruction is the rise of early American conservationism, which foregrounded preservation and the establishment of national parks. Again conflating Native Americans with the wilderness, the portrait painter

³³ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 2nd edn. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012) p. 133.

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George Catlin laments the loss of the buffalo and with them, the possible extinction of Indian tribes. Catlin documented his encounters with various tribes and in his record envisioned a wilderness preserve that included Indians, horses, elks and buffaloes.³⁴ He writes: “[one] imagines them as they might in future be seen, (by some great protecting policy of government) [...] in a magnificent park, where the world could see for ages to come, the native Indian in his classic attire, galloping his wild horse [...] amid the fleeting herds of elks and buffaloes.” Catlin’s project of documenting tribes on the one hand did enable the recovery and continuation of Native practices, but as is evident through his attitude to the parks, his images of indigenous peoples appropriated their customs and fixed them in the past – an act of curatorial preservation that refuses to acknowledge Native nations as sovereign, living entities.

Erdrich makes Catlin a key part of the plot of her novel *Shadow Tag*, (2010) a novel that in which the husband, a famous Native artist, captures his wife in a series of portraits even as their marriage is breaking down. The adolescent narrator of *Shadow Tag* (revealed at the end of the novel to be Riel, the couple’s only daughter), becomes fearful after the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre and plans how to survive a future attack “using the skills of her ancestors.”³⁵ Pertinent to this study of *The Birchbark House* series is Riel’s reconciliation of her Indian identity with what she is taught in school:

She had learned that they could survive in the wild, that they lived on buffalo, hunted with bows and arrows, never cried except when looking at the ruin white people had made of their land. Indians wore powwow clothes all of the time and could talk to animals. Riel had to wonder why she couldn’t do any of these things. Maybe she could train herself.³⁶

³⁴ Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 10.

³⁵ Louise Erdrich, *Shadow Tag* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), p. 60.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

The disconnect between Riel's day to day life and what she learns about Native Americans speaks into the argument made by this thesis and elsewhere for the positive and accurate representation of Native culture in popular media and school curricula. Riel's knowledge about Indians fixes them in the wilderness and in the past, which again connects the novel to Catlin, — his documentation of, and fixation on, Indian 'wildness' — and the creation of a park.

Catlin suggests that the park he envisages should be an institution, for which he would wish "no other monument to my memory [...] than the reputation of having been the founder."³⁷ Though Catlin's dream was eventually made a reality in the National Parks Service, the reference to Indians has been all but wiped out, with David Spence remarking that "The American wilderness ideal [...] includes a number of strange notions about native peoples and national parks. In the rare instances that park literature even mentions Indians, they tend to assume the unthreatening guise of 'first visitors'".³⁸ The elimination of Indians from the 'wilderness' landscape illustrates the conceptualisation of Native people as savage (wild) or noble (vanishing). Neither had a place in the construction of the American environment as 'free' from man's influence, as Sarah Ray writes: "environmentalism initially served colonialism's agenda of dispossessing Native Americans of territory, land, and access to resources."³⁹ The division of the American landscape into farmsteads, wild parks and Indian reservations leads to a discussion of mapping and cartography, and its usefulness in claiming and re-claiming the land.

³⁷ George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians* (London: Tossell and Myers, 1841), p. 262, see also Miles A. Powell, *Vanishing America: Species Extinction, Racial Peril, and the Origins of Conservation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

³⁸ Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, p. 5.

³⁹ Sarah Jaquette Ray, *The Ecological Other* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013), p. 89.

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Mapping Erdrich's Novels

Cartography has a significant role in the shaping of indigenous land claims, and in demarcating Native land and resources. Far from the concept of 'terra nullius' that is, land unclaimed by a sovereign nation, indigenous cartography re-inscribes and re-charters the land, offering new meanings and interpretations of the landscape and its uses by indigenous populations. An example of such a mapping can be seen in the court case *Delgamuukw v The Queen* in which the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en First Nations fought the provincial and federal government of Canada for recognition of their native sovereignty. Although oral history was a key part of the evidence presented by the First Nations, it was, according to Matthew Sparke, the maps that "articulated their claim to their territories in a way the judge might understand. In the process, they were effectively cartographing their lands as First Nations within the abstract state-space of Cartesian cartography."⁴⁰ The outcome of the trial was not in the First Nations' favour, but nonetheless their case shows how adopting the process of Cartesian mapping enabled their claims to be recognised alongside more traditional indigenous methods of historical record.

The Walking Purchase of 1737 is an example of fraudulent land transfer in which the founders of Pennsylvania used cartography to deceive the Lenape Indians. Known as the 'walking purchase' because the land to be purchased by the Penns amounted to a day-and-a-half's walk, the tribe were defrauded twice, first through the use of a map which misrepresented a distant river as a nearby creek, and secondly through a deed that Thomas Penn said had been signed by the Lenape Chief's ancestors fifty years before, agreeing to the

⁴⁰ Matthew Sparke, 'A Map that Roared and an Original Atlas: Canada, Cartography, and the Narration of Nation' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 88.3 (1998), 463-495, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/0004-5608.00109>>

purchase. The case was brought to court by the Delaware Nation in 2004, seeking to reclaim 314 acres taken in the sham purchase. It proceeded to the Circuit Court in 2006, which upheld the District Court's decision that aboriginal title may be extinguished, even by fraud.

As these cases show, maps were vital in establishing early American geopolitics, and in the mid-to-late 1800s, when Erdrich's stories are set, geographical knowledge of the expansive United States increased rapidly. Atlases became a staple in middle class homes, and mapmakers "shaped the new Americans' view of their space and of Minnesota's location within the United States."⁴¹ Crucially, at this time, the new maps were also demonstrative of white Americans' claim to the new land they were settling. David Lanegran describes the process by which settlers' claims to land were represented in cartography, to the detriment of indigenous claims and presence: "Native American claims to land were recognised but downplayed. Land-cession treaties took on special prominence on maps of Minnesota Territory after its creation in 1849."⁴² In light of this, the maps that Erdrich includes in the novels (see appendix) can be read in a variety of ways. Firstly, they map the ancestral territory on which the characters live and hunt, in a way which reinscribes Native sovereignty over those regions as they existed in the early nineteenth century. Secondly, the maps give real-life geographical context to the narrative; reminding the reader that the story is based on the experiences of the tribe who lived in that area before colonisation and thirdly, they provide a 'way in' to the narrative as key plot points are marked on the map. This conflation of the geographical and literary, the real and the imagined, places the *Birchbark House* novels in a landscape that is being reclaimed through the act of writing. Through the use of maps, the novels present a narrative that is embedded in within a specific geography and as such, they can be read as a

⁴¹ David Lanegran and Carol Urness, *Minnesota on the Map: A Historical Atlas* (St Paul, MN: The Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008), p. 39.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 39.

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narrative of re-discovery that counters the historical mapping and narratives of discovery that were in themselves acts of claiming. The maps also show how the novels function as a narrative of migration, marking a journey throughout which significant events occur that then in turn affect the direction of travel.

Erdrich foregrounds the issue of land across many of her adult novels, most clearly in *Tracks*, *Love Medicine*, and in her non-fiction work, *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*. *Tracks* highlights the changes wrought on the Ojibwe community by the fur trade, logging companies, and the reservation system. The ways in which *Love Medicine* engages with the notion of the border has been explored by Rita Ferrari, whose reading of representation and borders in the novel can illuminate the ways in which the maps of the *Birchbark* series might also be understood to function. Ferrari, writing about Marie Lazarre and the maps “drawn by White culture” that stop at the reservation, suggests that it is in the “imaginative assertion of vision [...] that new maps begin.” This assertion of vision, then, can be applied to Erdrich’s re-mapping of territory in the *Birchbark* books with Anishinaabe story, as a counter to the maps drawn by white settler culture both in the literal mapping of territory and in the cultural mapping of America that seeks to erase the presence of indigenous nations.⁴³

Books and Islands is a travel narrative of a journey Erdrich made with her infant daughter through the lakes and islands of southern Ontario. In it, Erdrich embraces the landscape as storied, full of history and connection to the legacy of dispossession, and to the future, through physical text and the kind of ‘living book’ that is intertwined with the land. Indeed, as Stephanie Fitzgerald notes, “the Ojibwe word for map, ‘akii-mazina’igaan,’ [consists] of two words, “akii,” or land, and “mazina’igaan,” or book, paper, or document, the term

⁴³ Rita Ferrari, “‘Where the maps stopped’: The aesthetics of borders in Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*.” *Style* 33.1 (Spring, 1999), p. 147.

literally means 'land book'. It invites us to read the land, and the narratives it holds, as texts."⁴⁴

Seeing the landscape as a site that can be read can transform our understanding of connection to the land, and in turn, how we conceptualise it through cartography. Mishuana Goeman explains:

Rather than mapping space as homogenous, bounded, and temporally linear, the Native writers I discuss see the land as having a history that must be respected; it is not a contained space but has connections to multiple other spaces, histories, and people.⁴⁵

By including maps in her novels, Erdrich opens up the possibility for the land to be read as narrative, and circles back to the idea that the land is more than a resource, it is imbued with stories and people – a living history.

As storytelling, the maps can be viewed sequentially and show the movement of Omakayas' family over time. On the first map, in the book, *The Game of Silence*, movement is indicated by a broken line and demarcates the area of seasonal movement between the birchbark house and the winter cabin. Plot points are also mapped, as 'The shore where the raggedy ones appeared', 'where Omakayas met her spirit, alone', and 'the mission and home of the break-apart girl'. This map suggests a time of peace, being described in the title as a 'map of adventures'. The map also describes this area of seasonal migration as a 'beloved home', a designation that is in contrast to the later description of the Turtle Mountains as the 'reservation home' in the fourth map. The second map, in *The Porcupine Year*, charts the migration from the Island of the Golden Breasted Woodpecker to the Lake of the Woods, still described as a 'year of adventure' but with danger made apparent in the various designations

⁴⁴ Stephanie J. Fitzgerald, *Native Women and Land: Narratives of Dispossession and Resurgence* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2015), p. 46.

⁴⁵ Mishuana Goeman, *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 206.

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along the way: 'taken!', 'betrayal and loss occur here' and a small drawing of Old Tallow throwing a spear at a bear, a reminder of her death in pursuit of food for the starving family.

The third map, in *Chickadee*, has a complex series of routes and descriptions that illustrate the family's journey to the Great Plains in search of Chickadee. Although the abduction of Chickadee is the catalyst for migration, this is not marked on the map. Instead, rivers intersect with oxcart trails, blending a natural source of food and sustenance with the new form of trading and travel. The novel focuses on the relationship between the twin brothers, Makoons and Chickadee, and this is reflected in the illustrations or plot points on the map: 'Chickadee escapes', 'Quill and Chickadee meet' and 'Pembina / the cabin where Makoons lay sick'. This is also the first time there is a sense of Louise Erdrich's own involvement in the story, with the marking of her hometown on the map: 'The future town of Wahpeton (hometown of the author)'. This interruption of the historical novel with a direct link to the present can be understood in the context of Homi Bhabha's idea of the 'past-present', and by including it Erdrich emphasises the inseparability of the two and the present-day impact of these historical events recorded in her stories.

The fourth and final map to date, in *Makoons*, shows the journey between Pembina and the Turtle Mountain reservation, a journey that is made twice by Gichi Noodin. On the map he is described as 'a changed man' and indeed the novel shows his development from a figure of ridicule to a rescuer who is welcomed into the family. Below this migration line the buffalo of the Great Plains are shown west of the Red River and Makoons as a rider and hunter. These illustrated maps therefore add depth to the written narrative by placing the stories in their geographical context, mapping them into the landscape that is both historical and recognisable today. The landscape Erdrich writes is also distinctly Anishinaabe, with boundaries between the homelands of different tribes clearly demarcated. That is to say, the specificity of

tribal lands on the maps, and indeed, the distinction that the novels make between the Anishinaabe and other tribes, is important as it counters the perceived homogeneity of Native Americans, and in turn, emphasises the severity of the loss of tribal homelands.

Finally, the maps continue to emphasise, as the novels do, the interdependence between people and landscape. Kimberley Blaeser connects the story and the landscape when she describes the reciprocity in seasonal activities and the reciprocity of a story's re-telling:

Just as our bodily labour is rewarded with physical and spiritual sustenance, our telling or retelling of story teaches appropriate process, enriches our experiences, and builds communal connections.⁴⁶

Blaeser suggests that the repetition of these practices and stories ensures "tribal continuance" and builds a "genealogy of story".⁴⁷ Erdrich's novels attend to both of these through the documentation in story of seasonal actions, connecting the landscape of the novels to the survivance of Omakayas' family and their culture. The Mississippi river is connected to the teaching of the chickadee, medicines are found in swamps, and the buffalo are hunted and honoured. The maps and the novels show a form of land use that was remarkably different to anything the European settlers could imagine, free of the bordered divisions that characterised the post-contact landscape.

Borders

Borders, at first glance, do not trouble the protagonists of the *Birchbark* series. The first book is unmapped, the family's movement determined by seasonal cycles, and the island's

⁴⁶ Kimberley Blaeser, 'Gerald Vizenor and the Affiliation of Story', in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World Through Stories*, ed. by Jill Doerfler et. al., (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2013), p. 241.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

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border defined by its own shore. Borders are something imposed, defined by settlements of Euro-Americans and a new definition of land ownership. The first sense of displacement for Omakayas and her family is found, arguably, in *The Game of Silence*. Although there is evidence of settler communities prior to this, with the arrival of smallpox, and Albert LaPautre's intimation that the Ojibwa would be safe farther west, there is not yet a sense that this will cost Omakayas' people their homeland. Indeed, it is the second smallpox epidemic to affect Omakayas' people; the first being when she was an infant and survived, alone, on Spirit Island. In *The Game of Silence*, the family first consider the need to move westward:

The ogimaa said that the government now owned the ground they lived on. It was needed for white settlers. He had issued a removal order. He had decided that land payments would be given out in a new place in the west. But the western land was the home of the Bwaanag [...] 'There was a time when we had no quarrel with the Bwaanag,' said Deydey. 'They lived in their part of the world and we in ours. We even traded with them. But as the chimookomanag push us, so we push the Bwaanag. We are caught between two packs of wolves.'⁴⁸

Ogimaa is the term for president, who has ordered the Anishinaabe westward into the land of a rival tribe, the Bwaanag (Dakota Sioux). Indifferent to intertribal relations, the command relayed in this passage demonstrates the sharp contrast between the land as commodity and the earth as a series of homelands. It also expresses the colonial notion of Indians as a collective, indistinct people when in fact, as Erdrich goes on to show, there exists a complex network of tribes that trade with one another across boundaries. There are borders, then, between homelands, but these are only visible, only problematic, when their crossing is forced and as such they could be considered zonal boundaries rather than hard borders. Traditional beliefs, such as the west being the land of the dead, further complicate the expulsion of the

⁴⁸ Erdrich, *The Game of Silence*, p. 21.

tribe from their homeland. In the first novel, when white encroachment is discussed, the land of the west is associated with the land of the dead: "West is where the spirits of the dead walk. If the whites keep chasing us west, we'll end up in the land of the spirits." This is an Anishinaabe belief that Margaret Noodin relates to the tribal specificity of Erdrich's narrative, saying: "By allowing the Anishinaabe to speak for themselves in her novels, Erdrich forces the readers to see the nameless "Indians" as individuals."⁴⁹ Furthermore, as Seema Kurup notes, "In many of Erdrich's novels [...] warring tribes often disrupt idyllic tribal life, so that a picture of the complex social relations among tribes is offered rather than a facile, one-dimensional portrait of Native American life."⁵⁰ The borderless nature of the relationship with neighbouring tribes is not to say that boundaries didn't exist; they were negotiated, warred over, and upon agreement, respected. Where borders are absent from Erdrich's texts speaks more about the understanding of land ownership, a concept alien to Omakayas' family.

In *The Game of Silence*, the characters are discussing the treaties that have been made, and in doing so express the distinction between resources and ownership:

'we signed a paper that said they could take the trees. We signed a paper that said they could take the copper from the earth,' said the old chief Bizhiki, disturbed, 'we didn't say they could take the earth.' 'Who can take the earth?' Fishtail spoke [...] 'I'll tell you,' he answered himself [...] 'when the chimookomanag open up the earth they believe they own it just like a kettle, just like this deerskin, just like this knife!'"⁵¹

Fishtail uses items made from raw materials to illustrate the difference between ownership of an item made from the earth's resources and ownership of the land itself. The phrase 'open up the earth' suggests a violation, by comparison the items Fishtail refers to are created by

⁴⁹ Noodin, *Bawaajimo*, p. 72.

⁵⁰ Seema Kurup and Linda Wagner-Martin, eds., *Understanding Louise Erdrich* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2016), p. 86.

⁵¹ Erdrich, *The Game of Silence*, pp. 20-21.

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hand and used for sustenance and survival. This is the first sign of external boundaries being placed on the tribe through forced migration to what would eventually become the 'leftovers', the Turtle Mountain reservation that is described in the fifth book, *Makoons*, as "the home reservation of the ancestors' family and the pretty mother of the author."⁵²

The division of land in the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887 (known as the Dawes Act) created lasting effects, and, as Stephanie Fitzgerald argues, stems from the "common belief that the individual ownership of land and 'civilisation' went hand in hand."⁵³ It set out the formula by which reservation land would be allotted to individual Indians, and stipulated that the recipients would become U.S citizens, subject to its laws. Although the novels predate the Dawes Act by eleven years, the characters of Erdrich's novels experience the encroachment of external boundaries as they travel both temporally and geographically towards what will become their final 'home', and the presence of boundaries is manifested in a variety of ways.

One form of boundary can be seen in the third novel, *The Porcupine Year*, in the prologue of which Erdrich describes "the uncut forests of Minnesota" alluding to future destruction as she writes they "still stretched" and by the fourth novel, *Chickadee*, they have disappeared to make room for the city of St. Paul.⁵⁴ Upon his arrival at St. Paul in the cart with Uncle Quill (formerly Pinch), Erdrich describes Chickadee's awe at the size of the settlement. "Chickadee could see that they had used up forests of trees in making the houses. He could see that they had cut down every tree in sight [...] Everything that the Anishinaabeg counted on in life, and loved, was going into this hungry city mouth." The scope and greed of the city is so outside of Chickadee's experience and imagining that he describes it as "almost a spirit

⁵² Erdrich, 'Map' in *Makoons*, (no page number).

⁵³ Fitzgerald, *Native Women and Land*, p. 51.

⁵⁴ Erdrich, *The Porcupine Year*, p. xi.

world.”⁵⁵ Seema Kurup reads the loss of trees as “symbolic of the existential threat faced by the family, and the Ojibwe as a people.”⁵⁶ The devastation of habitat in order to make way for western towns is an expression of boundary placement because it removes all possibility of return and without a former home, pushes the family and more broadly, the tribe, into ‘allocated’, bordered, territory. The changes to the landscape that Chickadee and Quill observe fundamentally alter the “landmarks and marks/signs” that Heid Erdrich refers to in her discussion of an “Anishinaabe-centered epistemology that relates writing with landmark and marking with ongoing presence in place.”⁵⁷ Heid Erdrich connects the act of writing with physical landmarks, and to return briefly to the discussion of the novels’ maps, they perform a dual function as a map of physical landmarks and as a written ‘landmark’ that re-inscribes and re-places indigenous history and territory.

The shift in housing style from an indigenous birch bark house to a Euro-American cabin in the Great Plains and beyond further augments the sense of boundary imposition and loss of connection to the outside world. New boundaries are imposed upon family relationships, as Omakayas finds when they meet Quill’s wife, Margaret. Far from the communal living of the past, both geographically and metaphorically, they are not given shelter in Margaret’s house even though she is a relative. She expresses kindness towards them and connects them to the priest who can help find them a cabin, but does not offer hers: “they would have to wait for Chickadee’s return somewhere. But not in Margaret’s bed, as she was very protective of her pretty bed, it was clear!”⁵⁸ The family are given another cabin to live in, and in contrast to

⁵⁵ Erdrich, *Chickadee*, p. 155.

⁵⁶ Kurup, *Understanding Louise Erdrich*, p. 90.

⁵⁷ Heid E. Erdrich, ‘Literary Ancestry as Presence’, in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World Through Stories*, ed. by Jill Doerfler et. al., (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2013), p. 14.

⁵⁸ Erdrich, *Chickadee*, p. 102.

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Margaret's cabin which she only shares with her husband, Quill, the family live together in a way reminiscent of the birchbark house in the first novel. Their physical needs are met; their focus is on the safe return of the kidnapped Chickadee: "Although nine people lived in the tiny cabin, and one outside, there was empty space that could be filled only by Chickadee."⁵⁹ In a novel in which the family are home-less, Chickadee's place is nonetheless established as within the family, upon his return he is reunited with his twin brother and his mother, "where they belonged."⁶⁰

Place and Belonging

It is this sense of place, I would argue, that ties the family to the land and to one another throughout the series. Erdrich is clear about distinctions between the Indigenous family and settler culture in terms of land ownership, privileging a sense of place and belonging that emphasises the importance of the land and environment in ways beyond pure consumption of resources. Place, for Omakayas and her family, is rooted in seasonal movement; traditional hunting patterns that govern the tribe's relationship to the land. The environment is crucial then, to a sense of place, but it is also tied to a sense of self, as Clare Bradford suggests:

Erdrich's deft evocation of the moment when Omakayas feels herself to be free of the depression that has haunted her draws on the symbol of the sparrows to show how regeneration can be forged out of loss, and by implication, how Anishinabe culture can sustain human subjects, maintaining a sense of home and belonging even as familiar patterns of life are disrupted.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 165.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 191.

⁶¹ Bradford, *Unsettling Narratives*, p. 144.

Bradford refers to the end of the first novel, where Omakayas finds healing in the song of the sparrows, and I discuss this episode in relation to human-animal relationships earlier in the chapter. I also suggest that this act of recovery can be read into the family's connection to the land as a form of sustaining self and culture during the period of displacement, drawing on tradition and nature in the creation of new homes.

The sense of place Erdrich portrays brings us back to the idea of homeliness and the spiritual connectedness of all living things. As the storyline traces the family's removal west, eventually to within reach of the Turtle Mountain reservation (marked on the map in the fifth book), the landscape expands and contracts, and the narrative moves between the homely and the unhomely; the fear of removal and a new way of life becomes adaptation to unfamiliar territory, which in turn leads back to longing for the ancestral island of the first novel. Throughout the period of displacement, the sense of being 'at home' is disrupted throughout the novels until the family reach the Turtle Mountains:

The rest of the family, along with Little Shell's people, decided to travel to a place farther west. It was an area of low hills, surrounded by the plains. These hills were rich with oak and birch trees, with every sort of game. There was shelter from the wind during the long harsh winters of the great plains. This had long been a coveted stopping place, a center for trade, with lakes to fish and nuts and berries to gather. This place was called the Turtle Mountains. [Omakayas] sensed something before them – trees. They scented the air. The fragrance of leaves and forest earth reminded her of all she'd left behind well before she saw the green oasis on the plains. It reminded her of home.⁶²

The description in this passage focuses on the topography and abundance of natural resources. It resonates with the environment depicted in the first novel – the presence of birch, game, fishing lakes, and berries that previously guided the hunter-gathering subsistence lifestyle of

⁶² Erdrich, *Makoons*, pp. 129-130.

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the family. Omakayas is reminded of 'home', the island in Lake Superior called Moningwanaykaning and the family construct a cabin which is again reminiscent of the construction of the birch bark house in the first novel, with some significant spiritual differences.⁶³ Frances Washburn writes of stories:

Both information and aesthetic meaning carry the very essence of any group of people: what is necessary for survival, what they value, what they consider as simply beautiful, or, perhaps, what is necessary for the survival of the soul.⁶⁴

I suggest this be can applied to the treatment of home and landscape within the novels as they evoke aesthetic beauty, spirituality and survival that are tied to the protagonists' engagement with the world around them and in the search for a home, which is radically altered by colonisation. The series as it stands is book-ended with the construction of a home, but the treatment of the environment in the construction of each is markedly different.

The Birchbark House portrays the idyllic construction of a house in which the materials taken 'from the earth', such as the birch bark, are respectfully given thanks for through the offering of tobacco and prayers. In *Makoons*, tobacco is not offered for the materials which are "cut down...skinned off...dug out."⁶⁵ These short phrases add to the sense that the work being done is practical, efficient, and without particular spiritual significance. The emphasis is more akin to the house-building passage in *Little House on the Prairie*, that is to say, a practical, step-by-step description of the construction. All of the family have a part to play, but there is a sense of urgency and resignation that is not present in the earlier novel. I think it would be wrong to suggest, however, that Erdrich's view of the environment has changed over the course of the

⁶³ Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, p. 6.

⁶⁴ Frances Washburn, 'The Risk of Misunderstanding in Greg Sarris' *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts*, *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 16.3 (2004), pp. 70-82, p. 71.

⁶⁵ Erdrich, *Makoons*, p. 131.

novels. What is significant by this point in the series is the hardship that the family have experienced - the loss of Old Tallow, and other relatives and friends to disease and war, the painful disappearance and return of Chickadee, the recent death of Nokomis, grandmother, who died of old age amongst her garden on the Plains. The sense of resignation and practicality with which the new house is constructed further distinguishes it from the sense of homeliness that characterises the birchbark house and wooden lodge of the earlier novels.

A helpful question with which to interrogate the narrative as we consider the idea of 'belonging' then, is what represents homeliness for these characters, as it pertains to the land? To begin with, it can be read through a human ancestral connection to a particular way of life, and a way of using the land and its resources to sustain that culture. In other words, homeliness can be characterised by an intimate knowledge that is passed down through generations. In the character of Nokomis, there is a clear connection to what can loosely be termed the 'old ways.' She guides Omakayas spiritually during her formative years, overseeing the vision quest, teaching Omakayas how to use plants for healing, nurturing the family through times of sickness, and crucially, telling traditional Anishinabeg stories. Nokomis is, clearly, for Omakayas, part of what feels like 'home'. Once the new cabin is built, the family are protected from the winter, and begin to dwell on their loss:

Inside the little cabin, they talked and slept. They missed Nokomis very much because of the stories she'd tell during winter times when they were stuck inside their long-ago birchbark house. At first everyone was simply sad, thinking of how she'd start her tales, Mewinzha, mewinzha, a long time ago. And then suddenly Omakayas said those words.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Erdrich, *Makoons*, p. 133.

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Omakayas tells a story, as Nokomis would have done, and her story is about a man who falls in love with a mystical woman. The woman provides for the man, first making fires, cooking food and leaving moccasins in his home, then when he meets her, he agrees to travel to her share their food with the woman's family. On the way she makes shelters that are 'nice and cozy', with always just enough food for the two of them. At the end of the story, the man discovers that the woman is in fact a bear, who shape-shifts as a human and is rewarding the man for not hunting bears.

By placing this story here, as the family begin to reflect on the loss of Nokomis, it speaks to a greater sense of belonging within the tribe of the Anishinaabe, who are of the bear clan (or dodem), and reminds the family of the kindness of their protectors. The significance of this story's placement in the narrative is expressed by Margaret Noodin, who explains: "Although her books can be read any time of year, she places the reader with her characters in the midst of winter to hear the oldest and most important stories of the Anishinaabe community."⁶⁷ Through the placement of story within story, Erdrich ensures that traditional stories continue to be heard, and within the narrative, Omakayas continues the storytelling tradition begun by her grandmother – reviving something of that human connection to place and land through story. This demonstrates Stephanie Fitzgerald's argument that "Native people who are removed to unfamiliar locations must incorporate their original stories into new land narratives, literally re-placing themselves in a new land by creating new stories."⁶⁸ For Omakayas, the re-placement through story is a means of restoring an emotional and spiritual connection to Nokomis, and a way of situating herself and her family in their new home.

⁶⁷ Noodin, *Bawaajimo*, p. 75.

⁶⁸ Fitzgerald, *Native Women and Land*, p. 26.

Much of the idea of homeliness in the novels is also concerned with the family's physical ancestral home, and so it is unsurprising perhaps that the degree of homeliness is often characterised by the environment in which the family find themselves. There are topographies in which the family are at home, and other camps that are stopping places in alien territory. For instance, the home that the family make on the Great Plains, whilst a great adjustment, quickly becomes a simulacrum of their old home; a place where Nokomis can plant a garden and gather medicines, and the family can hunt. In this model of 'home-land', traditional ways are practised, healing can occur, and knowledge is passed on through the generations: "Omakayas was not a medicine person yet, not like Nokomis, although her grandmother was teaching her everything she knew."⁶⁹ Joy Hendry describes this process as "a crucial expression of indigeneity" in which the elders "passed on knowledge about [the environment's] benefits and dangers."⁷⁰ The process of gaining knowledge for Omakayas, then, is inextricably linked to the pattern of eldership and land use that we see throughout the novels.

By contrast, in *The Porcupine Year*, the family are camped in an area close to their enemies, the Bwaanag, and long for a place to settle. As the family discuss travelling north to Lac du Bois (Lake of the Woods), Nokomis wants to find a place for her garden, Miskobines is longing for the berry patches of the north, and Yellow Kettle insists on the need for rice beds. These are all environmental conditions that exist in the homeland of the first novel, and which have the potential to exist in the Turtle Mountains settlement that the family are looking towards in the final book. It is these conditions that will enable the continuance of the traditional way of life, and as such, homeliness in relation to the land can be read not as an

⁶⁹ Erdrich, *Chickadee*, p. 164.

⁷⁰ Joy Hendry, *Reclaiming Culture: Indigenous People and Self-Representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 158.

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attachment to one singular tract of land, though these claims are important for myriad reasons, but to the continuance of a culture whose self-definition is contingent on, inextricably connected to, ways and practices of being within a particular Anishinaabe landscape.

Homeliness can also be considered in relation to the importance of kinship ties, as repeatedly throughout the novels any time when the family are together, regardless of physical location, there is a sense of comfort, security and stability. When family members are absent or have died, such as after the smallpox epidemic, or during Chickadee's captivity, some of the family are affected by depression, fevers, and anxiety. 'Belonging' is to be part of a kinship network, to live in a family group, with all the support, love and shared experience that that entails. The importance of this is repeated throughout the novels, particularly as it relates to the family's relocation.

In *The Porcupine Year*, as Omakayas' elders discuss their needs in terms of the natural environment, Omakayas is dreaming of being with her extended family: "Omakayas could almost smell the fish stew her Auntie Muskrat might be cooking. Soon, oh how soon, they would all be together, just the way they had been back in the golden days on the golden island, when she was small."⁷¹ For Omakayas, her surroundings are as much comprised of the people she will be with, and throughout the novels there is an emphasis on the 'home' land as a place of gathering for the wider family and tribe.

The narrative as it stands ends with a lack of permanent settlement, though there is the promise of the Turtle Mountain reservation. Erdrich reveals the land in her novels to be part of the 'lived relationships' between individuals and tribes as they negotiate and form 'landscape and identity.'⁷² Although she is writing about a period of profound disruption, war

⁷¹ Erdrich, *The Porcupine Year*, pp. 47-8.

⁷² Wittgen, *Infinity of Nations*, p. 20.

and upheaval, the books foreground the relationships between people and land in ways which indirectly thematise land rights by drawing attention to Ojibwe beliefs in the interconnectedness of living things, and by framing those rights and relationships in the bildungsroman of a young girl and then her sons. Throughout the novels, Erdrich demonstrates the connections between land, home and Anishinaabe identity and culture. In doing so, she makes the novels part of the process of land reclamation and the argument for Indigenous land rights, literally re-mapping the territory of the nineteenth century Ojibwe landscape.

The themes of the novels correlate with contemporary Anishinaabe issues and connect the historical setting to the present day, as well as to Erdrich's own activism and adult fiction. This enables the series to be thought of, like the maps, as reaching beyond geographical and temporal borders to show how the Anishinaabe values conveyed in the novels are relevant to contemporary Anishinaabe culture. The consideration of land and environment is connected, as I have shown, to ideas about the home as a physical structure and a sense of place. The relocation of the family touches on issues of conservationism, sovereignty, history and identity; issues that continue to affect Native people as the protests at Standing Rock and elsewhere have shown.

The Home

The home in *The Birchbark House* series represents a complex series of negotiations with issues of personal and cultural identity at a time when both were increasingly threatened by white settlement. The home in this context is both a bordered space and border/less, as Erdrich explores the dichotomy between the safety of physical borders and ideas of connectedness with the natural world. William Bevis describes nature in the Native American novel as the “tipi walls extended” signifying the interconnectedness of the natural environment and the home, to the extent that ‘Nature is “house.”’¹ The homecoming model that Bevis proposes has been discussed by many Erdrich scholars, including Lorena Stookey who describes the homing plot – Bevis’ argument that Native characters come home, by contrast, white characters’ ‘light out for the territories’ – as the “necessary occasion of characters’ coming to terms with questions of who they are and where they belong.”² This is evident in much of Erdrich’s fiction, where the home, and its wider environment is central to the plot of the novels, as Kenneth Lincoln argues: “Her motif is coming home to the motherland, literally to the kitchen hearth.”³ This narrative trajectory, of homing, necessarily moves beyond the physical, and the interrogation of home as ‘identity’ has been developed by Erdrich in later novels (*Future Home of the Living God*), and in YA fiction where home is destabilised, resulting

¹ William Bevis, ‘Native American Novels: Homing In’, in *Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature*, ed. by Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 602.

² Lorena Laura Stookey, *Louise Erdrich: A Critical Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), p. 26.

³ Kenneth Lincoln, *Indi’n Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 209.

in a 'homing' plot that is less about a return to a physical place and more about developing a sense of belonging and identity (Alexie's *True Diary*, Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*).

By contrast, within the sphere of children's literature, Ann Alston has described the home as a "sanctuary, a place to retreat to," a word that "invokes nostalgia for warmth and comfort."⁴ This idea of the home, taken from children's books in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is at odds with what Mavis Reimer has described as the privileging of homelessness by "postmodern celebrations of mobile subjectivities" and the embracing of "metaphorical homelessness as an ideal" by contemporary writers.⁵ Whether a result of postmodern sensibilities or cultural difference, the function and representation of home in children's literature needs to be re-examined.

Erdrich's novels sit somewhere in-between the two extremes of sanctuary and homelessness, depicting first the seasonal movement of Ojibwe people, then their forced migration, whilst invoking a strong sense of home. The privileging of homelessness as an 'ideal' is contra to Ojibwe beliefs about the home and environment, as to position it as such suggests that migratory homelessness is the inverse of Alston's description of a stable, secure home. *The Birchbark House* series, then, necessarily eschews both the classic and postmodern conceptions of the home within contemporary children's literature to show how the patterns of home in Anishinaabe culture can be considered both migratory and stable.

L. P. Chang asserts that as a result of modern hypermobility home is "more than ever, a construct of writing and imagination."⁶ It is precisely this construct that contributes to, and

⁴ Ann Alston, *The Family in English Children's Literature* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p. 70.

⁵ Mavis Reimer, 'Homing and Unhoming: The Ideological Work of Canadian Children's Literature' in *Home Words: Discourses of Children's Literature in Canada* ed. by Mavis Reimer, (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2008), p. 2.

⁶ Li Ping Chang, '(Re)Location of Home in Louise Erdrich's *The Game of Silence*', *Children's Literature in Education*, 42, (2011), 132-147, p. 133.

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even makes possible, the continuation of a culture that the home represents. If, as Chang suggests, our conceptualisation of the home can be evoked and perpetuated through literature and popular media, I argue that this results in the home being read as cultural representation, and, therefore, that the homes constructed in *The Birchbark House* narrative are all the more significant as markers of Anishinaabe culture. Tasoulla Hadjiyanni and Kristin Helle describe the home under forced migration or exile as a “site of resistance from dominant mainstream values” and in these novels both the homes depicted and the narratives themselves function as such.⁷

This chapter will explore the idea of the home as a safe space, before considering the home within the A-B-A structure common to children’s literature. I will then consider two key tropes that indicate homeliness within the novels — dreaming and work. I will suggest that the home in these narratives is commensurate with the concept of ‘sanctuary’ that Alston describes, whilst also encompassing the natural world beyond in a way that traditional Anglo-American stories of the frontier do not. The discussion will also demonstrate how Erdrich portrays Ojibwe customs during a time of significant and irreversible cultural change.

Safe Spaces

The Birchbark House begins with a scene of devastation and isolation. Alone on Spirit island, the infant Omakayas is the only survivor of a smallpox epidemic that has killed her family. Helpless and *homeless*, the baby “crawled in a circle, whimpering and pitiful.”⁸ Initially ignored by the traders who discover her, afraid that she might be infected with the disease, she is later rescued and adopted. It is perhaps significant therefore, that the first encounter

⁷ Tasoulla Hadjiyanni and Kristin Helle, ‘Re/claiming the Past – Constructing Ojibwe Identity in Minnesota Homes’, *Design Studies*, 30 (2009), 462-481, p. 463.

⁸ Louise Erdrich, *The Birchbark House* (New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1999, repr. 2002), p. 1.

the reader has with Omakayas after this is the harvesting of birchbark to make the family's summer dwelling, suggesting that from her homeless beginnings, the now seven-year-old Omakayas is helping to build a home. This is further illustrated in the playful activity of hopping between hummocks and tree stumps in the bog: "Omakayas now stared long at the silky patch of bog before she gathered herself and jumped. One hummock. Safety."⁹ The small act of hopping, and the emphasis on the word 'safety' as a single word echoes the earlier hop between islands that Omakayas took as a vulnerable infant.

The pattern of home building in the novels reflects the landscape of the protagonists, both literally and culturally. Mapping the seasonal round onto her story of forced migration enables Erdrich to place greater emphasis on the disruption to traditional ways of life that colonisation and settler house-building brings. For example, the seasonal structure is observed in the first and second novels of the five-part series, and broken from the third novel onwards, reflecting the departure of the family from their ancestral island westward into northern Minnesota, and then further in the fourth novel, *Chickadee*. In this novel, the eponymous house of the first novel is violently blown away in a storm over the Plains:

This was the last time the family would ever make a house of birchbark. Their house blew away, and they never saw it again. Such houses were for the woods. They were now people of the Great Plains. But they hadn't learned yet how to live there.¹⁰

The violence of the wind that tears the family's home away from them echoes the violent abduction of a child that has led to the journey into the Plains. Against this backdrop, the solid wooden cabins that greet them appear to provide an opportunity for respite, but they are in stark contrast to the renewable birchbark structure that has characterised their previous way

⁹ Ibid, p. 5.

¹⁰ Louise Erdrich, *Chickadee* (New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 2012), p. 64.

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of life. The new land does not enable the family to live as they used to and this is revealed in a series of anxieties such as the fear of illness from close contact with large groups of people and the struggle to make containers from the birch trees on the plains which had “thin and crinkly skin [...] they made frail baskets, and terrible buckets.” The houses are described as “whitewashed, pasted over with written papers” and the family plant seed potatoes given to them by the priest.¹¹ The steps taken to plant potatoes (that are given, not gathered) seem paltry in comparison to the earlier descriptions of the grandmother’s garden in previous books.

One of the primary features of a physical dwelling-home is the literal construction of a safe space, defined as much by what it keeps out as what it allows in. There is also the figurative safe space, one which relies on the presence of family members and community regardless of physical location and dwelling. This is explored in the later novels when the family is forced to leave their ancestral island and journey onto the Great Plains. Although separated from the island referred to as home, the travelling family become their own safe space from which Omakayas ventures and returns. In this sense, it is impossible to reconcile firstly the seasonal structure of the narrative, and later, a displaced people, with the home-away-home trope so common in Western children’s literature. Nonetheless, there are patterns which emerge throughout the novels privileging home and family (the ‘safe space’) against a backdrop of threats from the natural and human environment. To an extent, the external threats to the family as a whole become greater than the individual desire for rebellion and return. As Catherine Rainwater observes, “Native American individuation occurs in close relationship with nature, whereas Western individuation is conceived as a coherent development of a unique psychological essence present from birth but formed and shaped by civilisation.”¹² Erdrich

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 99, 146.

¹² Catherine Rainwater, ‘Reading Between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich,’ *American Literature*, 62.3 (1990), pp. 405-422, p. 422.

emphasises the needs of the collective rather than the individual and in so doing builds a Native worldview throughout the text that stands in contrast to those texts that privilege individualism.

One such text is Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*. The *Birchbark House* novels have been described as the 'other side' of Wilder's portrayal of frontier settlement, and Louise Erdrich commented on this in an interview given in 2009:

When I heard that, I thought, "I didn't start out that way, but I'm awfully glad when people do read *The Birchbark House* and the rest of the books along with the *Little House on the Prairie* books, because one of the things about the Laura Ingalls Wilder books that always distresses me is Ma's racism [...] there's also inherent racism in the structure of the Wilder books themselves: the simple acceptance of the fact that the *Little House* characters could just go along and take whatever they wanted and that the native people were apparently vanishing into the sunset.¹³

Little House on the Prairie can be read alongside *The Birchbark House* to illuminate the differing attitudes towards the landscape, environment and home in indigenous and settler texts. In order to understand what makes the home a safe space, we should consider the inverse – what is being kept out. In both novels, the homebuilding itself is a feature of the narrative, described in painstaking detail. In Erdrich's novels, the construction of the birchbark house is the first event of the first novel, and the work is carried out exclusively by the women. Omakayas and her grandmother identify and collect the bark for the roof, while her sister and mother make the willow frame. The bark is woven together to overlap like shingles and then secured to the frame. One of the key differences between Erdrich's and Wilder's novels is in attitude to the land being settled, and it is telling that Erdrich devotes more description to the finding of, and collecting, the bark, than she does to the building of the house. In the essay 'Where I Ought to

¹³ Teachingbooks.net, 'Louise Erdrich In-depth Written Interview', 23 October 2009, <<http://www.teachingbooks.net/qlzku9>>

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Be', Erdrich concludes by describing the human relationship with the environment as being like a child to its parents: "we form the same dependent relationship, relying completely on its cycles and elements, helpless without its protective embrace."¹⁴ A similar sense of dependent relationship with the environment is expressed by the characters in the novels, for example through the giving of an offering to the tree from which the bark is taken: "When she talked to the manitous, Nokomis dipped out a pinch of tobacco. 'Old Sister,' she said to the birchbark tree, 'we need your skin for our shelter.'"¹⁵ This contrasts to the homebuilding in *Little House on the Prairie* which gives little regard to the provenance of the building timber, but in which Wilder devotes five chapters to the building and home-making, seven if you count the addition of a water well and chimney.

Whilst Laura's mother contributes to the building work, as does a neighbour, it is Laura's father who collects the wood and does the bulk of the work. The description of the house-building is meticulous, detailing how each aspect of the house was made. One example is the main door:

He laid the long slabs together on the ground and placed the shorter slabs across them. Then with the auger he bored holes through the cross-pieces into the long slabs. Into every hole he drove a wooden peg that fitted tightly. That made the door. It was a good oak door, solid and strong.¹⁶

The emphasis throughout on the strength of the building work invites us to look beyond the basic need for shelter and consider what is being kept *out* of the structure. In one sense, it fulfils the human desire for containment within the seemingly unending prairie:

¹⁴ Louise Erdrich, 'Where I Ought to Be: A Writer's Sense of Place', *New York Times* 28 July 1985.

¹⁵ Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, p. 7.

¹⁶ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, (Middlesex: Puffin Books, 1964), p. 71.

There was only the enormous, empty prairie [...] and the great blue sky above it [...] And on the whole enormous prairie there was no sign that any other human being had ever been there.¹⁷

Not only does this passage emphasise the vastness, it deftly erases the Indians to present the prairie as empty, contributing to the aspect of the novel that Smulders claims: “denies the real experience of aboriginal Americans in order to validate the assimilation of the American landscape to the civilising project of frontier settlement.”¹⁸ In another sense, the physical borders of the house delineate the threshold between wild and civilised, recognising the presence of the Indians-as-threat, and are made all the more apparent when they are violated. The home as a civilised space pushes the indigenous inhabitants of the environment further out as the country is settled, leaving no room to explore the possibility of peaceful cohabitation.

On the contrary, the homes depicted in Erdrich's fiction reflect the communal attitude at the heart of the family and tribe. The openness is most keenly felt on two occasions when it results in disaster for the family; in the first novel, a smallpox epidemic breaks out after a stranger is welcomed, and in the fourth book, Omakayas' son is stolen from under the loose birchbark wall. These violations of what should be 'safe spaces' could be read similarly to *Little House* as instances that indicate the impossibility of peaceful cohabitation, but there are details throughout the novels that suggest otherwise. Two very different instances of intrusion into the private space of the home can be helpfully analysed to illustrate this.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 23.

¹⁸ Sharon Smulders, “The Only Good Indian’: History, Race and Representation in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie*’, *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, 27.4 (2002), 191-202, p. 191.

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In *Little House*, the Indian visitors are described from the perspective of the children who watch in horror from afar. They are described as ‘naked, wild’ ‘fierce-looking’ ‘terrible men’ and Laura’s fearful words are suggestive of violence or sexual misconduct:

Then Laura began to shake all over. She knew she must do something. She did not know what those Indians were doing to Ma and Baby Carrie. There was no sound at all from the house. ‘Oh, what are they doing to Ma!’ she screamed, in a whisper.¹⁹

The Indians are strangers to the Ingalls family, and throughout the novel they are held in position as Other by the family who believe them to be departing to make way for the settlers – “folks that’ll farm [the land].”²⁰ The violation of the ‘settled space’ of the home can be read as ironic as the house is a violation of indigenous land rights and freedom, which at the end of the novel we learn was the case indeed and Pa and the family must abandon their home because the land had not yet been approved for settlers. The reinforcement of the tropes of ‘wild’ and ‘vanishing’ Indian are enacted in this scene as the Indians are portrayed as scroungers and thieves: “they took all your tobacco, and they ate a lot of cornbread. They pointed to the cornmeal and made signs for me to cook some. I was afraid not to. Oh Charles! I was afraid!”²¹ The demand for food and theft of tobacco provides a contrast to the Ingalls’ practice of growing small garden crops and buying food in the town.

Food is also central to the intrusion of the home in *The Birchbark House* but in a very different way, and with long lasting effects. The visitor that is welcomed enters in to a time of celebration and feasting. The cluster of families, including Omakayas’ are in the dance lodge and the visitor is given food and blankets. There is no indication in the text that any exchange

¹⁹ Wilder, *Little House*, p. 94.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 142.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 99.

of words took place, but the reader is told what Omakayas understood: that the visitor was a fur trader, staying for the night. "A tired-looking man, thin and scraggly braids, coughing and feeble. A bit confused looking. A flushed, fevered face."²² The family that extended their home to him all succumbed to the smallpox that killed him, as did Ten Snow, a friend of Omakayas' family who had lent him her bowl. Later, Omakayas' infant brother also passes away as a result of the illness. The tone of the novel shifts from joy to fear as the celebration turns to mourning. Erdrich moves from languid sentences that reflect the movement of the dancers: "Trade silver tokens, bracelets, armbands, crosses flashed and ribbons swirled as the dancers moved in joy and excitement" to sentences broken with pauses, the bad news revealed by the repetition of "although...although...although." The role of the settler in this passage is both life-taker and healer, as the voyageur brings smallpox, the missionaries "kept them fed and warm" in the school building. Very swiftly the family and community go from being the ones giving shelter to the ones needing assistance, and this kind of exchange between settler and indigene throughout the novels engenders a very real sense of the kind of negotiation and cooperation that existed between the two cultures.²³ It is far removed from the characterisation of Indians as thieves by Wilder, and though Erdrich's portrayal of the smallpox epidemic wouldn't be considered a positive interaction, it refuses the oversimplification of Wilder's 'vanishing Indian' by showing the human 'cost' of white settlement.

A-B-A structure

The safe space of the home, as I have asserted, is not directly representative of 'the home' at the centre of the A-B-A pattern characterising much of Western children's fiction,

²² Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, p. 142.

²³ *Ibid*, pp. 142-3.

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and which Nodelman identifies as a significant 'marker' of children's fiction. In Erdrich's novels, the pattern can be mapped onto the traditional vision quest that occurs as a coming of age ritual. The process of fasting, alone, to seek out a dream signals maturity and it occurs several times within the novels for different characters. I link it to the A-B-A pattern because it is a significant time, often the first, in which the child protagonists are separated from their families and dwelling-homes to seek out a private calling. The home to which the young adult returns after a successful quest (not all were fruitful) is altered by the vision as the young adult returns with a role to fulfil within the community and a deeper understanding of their position in the world.

The vision quest for Omakayas occurs in the second book of the series, *The Game of Silence*. It emerges out of her own dreaming of a voice telling her that it was time for her to take the charcoal: "The voice was familiar but the speaker was hidden. Take the charcoal. But how could that be?"²⁴ The personal nature of the event is important because it underlines the fact that this is not a ritual enforced upon children to ensure their participation in a religion, or to guarantee their salvation. At a time when settler children were restricted in their behaviours and expected to be submissive to adults, Omakayas' spiritual development is gently guided and the quest itself is an exercise in both independence (finding a path or calling) and greater *dependence* on the spirit helper that reveals itself during the quest. Vernon Lattin, describing other Native and Chicano novels, says "[they] are also forms of rediscovery, attempts to return to the sacred art of storytelling and myth-making that is part of Indian oral tradition. They are attempts to push the secular mode of modern fiction into the sacred mode."²⁵ In Erdrich's

²⁴ Louise Erdrich, *The Game of Silence*, (New York: Harper Trophy, 2006), p. 59.

²⁵ Vernon E. Lattin, 'The Quest For Mythic Vision in Contemporary Native American and Chicano Fiction', *American Literature*, 50.4 (1979), 625-640, p. 16, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2925245>> Accessed 3 February 2016.

novels the turn to the 'sacred mode' is characterised by the frequent interweaving of traditional storytelling, including the creation myth, and the emphasis on the spiritual nature of the environment, enacted here through Omakayas' dream of a bear as her spirit-helper. The interconnectedness of the spiritual and physical world reinforces the idea that 'home' is not a single fixed dwelling, but encompasses the natural environment. The spirit-helpers are figures of guidance that, particularly as the novels progress, help Omakayas feel 'at home' even when the family is forced to migrate.

Omakayas' vision quest is the first time she has been away from home, and it occurs at a point in the narrative where for the first time, she becomes aware that her home is at risk. Erdrich builds into her narrative a concept of home that is layered with meaning, and connected to Erdrich's belief that the environment is a protector, a guardian. If the home is a safe space, representing protection, then the environment can also be considered a home, rather than a wilderness to be protected *from*. This corresponds with Keith Basso's argument that sense of place is tied to 'local knowledge' – a phrase Basso credits to Clifford Geertz – "with which persons and whole communities render their places meaningful and endow them with social importance."²⁶ Omakayas' vision quest then, is a ritual that results in more rootedness, and a stronger sense of home as it "maintains an inextricable relationship to a given place."²⁷ She leaves behind the safety of her parents and their home and ventures into a place of stillness where she seeks a connection to her surroundings as home.

In the text, Omakayas resists the practice, arguing with her intuition and invoking the memory of the hardship she has already suffered as a reason not to seek out further guidance:

²⁶ Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), p. 96. [kindle edition].

²⁷ David Martinez, 'The Soul of the Indian: Lakota Philosophy and the Vision Quest', *Wicazo Sa Review*, 19.2 (2004), 79-104, p. 80.

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Looking for a guardian was an important thing, but frightening, too. Omakayas had already dreamed of her protector, the bear. Her bear spirit had come to her after the terrible winter when she lost her brother. She didn't need to fast. She was sure that she had suffered enough!²⁸

Her stubbornness here is linked to grief for her infant brother, who died of smallpox in *The Birchbark House*. This reference connects the narratives of the two novels and reveals a sense of bitterness that is closely tied to the risk of starvation. We see elsewhere in the novels how her younger brother, already a food-lover, is affected by the memory of hunger and it replays itself here in Omakayas' resistance to deliberate fasting. The trauma of starvation has a lasting impact upon the development of traditional spiritual practices, and in turn, an Anishinaabe identity for Omakayas and her brother. The turnabout comes when Omakayas' gift of prophetic or knowledge dreams could be used to bring peace to her family.

This offers us one of the key differences between the trope used in other children's texts and this one – here the time spent away from home is not a rebellion, a striking out or a quest for independence. It is an act of personal significance that will impact the immediate family and community of which Omakayas is a part through the giving of a spiritual helper and gift. The fear that accompanies Omakayas' journey is not of “snakes, creeping things, weather, the dark, owls, or hunger,” but of the power that her dreams hold. “She both wanted to know, and didn't want to know, what they might tell her.”²⁹ Her brother's hasty gift of a dream-catcher again illustrates the bond between family members but it also an act of reclaiming that well-worn symbol of Native American culture by placing it back in its proper context and tied to Omakayas' spiritual development.

²⁸ Erdrich, *The Game of Silence*, p. 60.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 225.

Omakayas' reluctance to fully embrace the tradition, as a result of earlier trauma, results in a kind of pseudo-rebellion. Torn between what she knows is expected of her and her fear of what the spirit guide will reveal, she accepts the charcoal and goes into the woods, where her half-heartedness is made apparent: "As she placed Pinch's dream catcher over the entrance to her little shelter, she prayed for nothing to happen."³⁰ She passes the time of fasting in a dream-like state, singing the songs her grandmother taught her, but without enthusiasm: "Another song was a request for protection from the spirits. She was careful never to sing that one too loudly, in case some extra-powerful spirit whose attention she didn't want to attract might hear."³¹ These two examples of Omakayas' quashing the very activity she is supposed to be seeking keep the tension in the passage between what the reader is led to expect - a vision - and the behaviour of the central character who is resisting the culmination of her fast.

Erdrich gives the reader a foreshadowing of the narrative arc that is yet to come in Omakayas' eventual vision. The spiritual gift of prophetic dreaming that Omakayas knew she possessed and feared is used both within the immediate narrative to propel the story forwards and also to point beyond the current story and connect this moment with the wider story of migration and dispossession: "The events occurred so quickly that she couldn't remember them all [...] the vision she'd received [...] was the story of her life."³² With both historical knowledge and the available arc of the other texts, we as readers know that the story of Omakayas' life in her dream is a shadow of the story of the tribe. Prophetic dreams are used throughout the novels to build a sense of foreboding and anticipation, which I will discuss further later in the chapter in relation to the home as a site of dreaming.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 226.

³¹ Ibid, p. 227.

³² Ibid, p. 232.

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The occurrence of the vision quest for Omakayas is a profound event that shapes her interaction with the spirit world and with those around her. Erdrich contrasts this with the wildness of her cousin, Two-Strike, whose vision-seeking is used by the elders as a method of restraint, an opportunity to invite the spirits and seek out her destiny: "She has [his] fire, but she is young, and she lacks [his] ability to focus the flame. She needs guidance. Her family will put her out alone in order for the spirits to find her."³³ This suggests that Two-Strike's abilities and passion need to be refined in order to be of use to the tribe, rather than emerging from an internal desire to seek out the spirits. The spiritual practice is demonstrated here as a rite of passage and a living relationship with the spirit world as they are called upon by the elders out of desperation when the young girl's behaviour gets out of control. She is put out to fast on the "little northwest island" where she cannot run away, which again speaks of her fiery character and the need for the intervention of the spirits: "If she won't listen to her elders, at least she'd better listen to the spirits!"³⁴ Rather than the gentleness with which Omakayas is led to her vision quest, in this situation, the spirits' power is invoked as a form of admonishment.

Two-Strike's relationship to the home is therefore characterised quite differently to Omakayas'. A rebel who defies her elders, the process of being sent away to fast is an acquiescence to tradition. She returns unchanged, however, "as tough and braggy as ever [...]" Two-Strike [...] wormed her way out of every task she was given so poor Twilight had to haul twice as much water, work twice as hard."³⁵ Two-Strike's refusal to participate in the rituals of home, such as fetching water and preparing fishing nets, leads to her portrayal as an 'outsider' who needs to receive guidance and direction. In chapter four, I discuss the significance of Two-

³³ Ibid, p. 124.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 140.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 142.

Strike's arrogance in relation to gender identity, as she performs, along with Old Tallow, a two-spirit identity – that is, a third gender characterised by having both a masculine and feminine spirit.

There is an important distinction between the characters of Old Tallow and Two-Strike, both of whom have a fierce and warrior-like nature. Whilst Two-Strike exercises her authority and warrior behaviour over the younger boys of the tribe, and is known for being bossy, Old Tallow has earned her place as an elder and commands respect, even though her preference for isolation keeps her on the periphery of traditional home-making and family activities. This is most clearly expressed through Nokomis, the grandmother, who chastises her daughter for not disciplining Two-Strike: "It is not good for her to think her skills are her own. They were given by the Creator, and the Creator can take them away. In time, the Creator takes everything, as we know. Even the best, and the kindest, Old Tallow, who gave her life. If anyone had the right to arrogance, she did."³⁶ Again and again, we see the themes of respect and wisdom in relation to Two-Strike's untrained and unrestrained ability. Raised by her maternal aunt, she eschews the role of niece and cousin in order to fulfil the role of hunter in place of her unreliable and absent uncle. Through the opposing personalities of Two-Strike and Omakayas, Erdrich portrays a family that express what it means to be 'at home' and fulfil vital roles in remarkably different ways.

Homeliness

The next section of this chapter will look closely at the structures that function as homes across the narrative, from the seasonal birchbark and log structures, to the homes made on the Plains. Each become safe spaces within the narrative, and perform, as I will argue,

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 153.

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different functions as 'homes'. Cynthia Dobbs, in her analysis of 'home' in Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz*, (1992) shows how the concept of home can be linked to the idea of safe space:

An edenic home is not signalled here by a domestic (private, interior) place; rather, *home* is expanded to include the houses of other women and the interstices between those houses, a borderless space that encompasses both house and beyond.³⁷

The environment immediately beyond the physical house is also considered 'home' because in this 'edenic' situation the sites *outside* of the built 'home' are just as safe as within – the home is rendered borderless for the woman who lives free from predation. It is this precise pattern of matrilineal kinship that we see in Erdrich's novels which move between a sequence of 'safe spaces', all of which can be considered 'home'. To begin with, the seasonal round which forms the narrative structure of the first two novels demonstrates the outside-in approach to the home as the family are 'at home' in several places depending on the season. This is significant as it represents a way of life that is first threatened, and then lost, within the arc of the meta-narrative. The use of the seasonal round as structure is lost from the third book onwards which represents the family's homelessness and departure from the way of life that was not only possible, but self-sustaining on their ancestral land, therefore enabling us to draw a comparison between the deliberate nomadic life of the first two novels and the 'homelessness' as distinct from nomadism in the third, fourth and fifth novels.

Considering the island home of Omakayas as Dobbs describes, a borderless space, we can nonetheless examine how home is constructed as a physical dwelling at various places and for different times. The novels begin with the eponymous birchbark structure, which one could

³⁷ Cynthia Dobbs, 'Diasporic Designs of House, Home, and Haven in Toni Morrison's "Paradise"', *MELUS*, 36.2, Toni Morrison: New Directions (2011), 109-126, p. 110.

argue is really the point of distinction between Ojibwe culture and settler cultures of which the other structures are commonly a part such as log houses and camps. Gaston Bachelard argues that all inhabited spaces bear "the essence of the notion of home"³⁸ and this section of the chapter aims to pick apart what that essence is and how it is borne out in the dwellings constructed within these novels.

As I have discussed, the birchbark house is constructed by women as a shelter. Reflecting the matrilineality of Ojibwe culture, the home – its building and the keeping of it – is the domain of the women. It's transience, on the other hand, points to the voluntary nomadism of the family that move between woodland, town, rice field, and eventually the Plains. So what is it that binds all these locations together as homes, and reaching beyond them, to the island as a whole, also referred to as 'home'? I suggest that two key ideas emerge throughout the novels that demarcate a space as 'home' – dreaming, and work.

Gaston Bachelard argues that "the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace."³⁹ Dreams are central to the propulsion of the narrative, occurring as warnings, premonitions and as part of the process of healing. In the first novel, Nokomis uses dreams to find healing for Omakayas' depression.

Omakayas knew that Nokomis wanted her to search for and find a spirit helper, someone great in the spirit world who would help her to recover her will to live.⁴⁰

This rite of passage connects Omakayas to the spirit world through dreaming of her spirit helper, the bear woman. The words spoken in her dream are a source of comfort, reassuring

³⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, rev. edn., (New York: Penguin, 2014), p. 26.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 27.

⁴⁰ Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, p. 168.

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Omakayas of a shared connection to her ancestors: “I knew your great-grandma and great-grandpa. They live with me now.”⁴¹ The spirit dream symbolises a new start for Omakayas as she begins to heal from the losses of winter, and this is reflected in the placement of an adisokaan in the narrative immediately after – the Anishinabeg creation story. The telling of the story prompts Omakayas to help her family find food; “she would make her small, important effort like the muskrat”⁴² and this shows the reader that the adisokaan are ‘teaching’ stories rather than for pure entertainment. The dream and the story give Omakayas the impetus to recover for the benefit of her family. The second dream in this section of the narrative provides healing for the family’s physical hunger. Nokomis dreams of the location of a buck that Deydey is to kill for food. “Deydey knew that when Nokomis dreamed, especially in this extremity, it was a true dream and must be followed.”⁴³ In this single chapter, dreams are shown as tools for healing and guidance, to benefit individuals and family groups.

Omakayas’ dreams of the bear and Nokomis’ dream of the buck take place during the winter, in the log cabin. Another home-site is the birchbark house, and this is where a different kind of dreaming takes place in the second novel, *The Game of Silence*. When her brother Pinch is left behind during a terrible storm, Omakayas’ dream reveals her inner turmoil that flashes between her brother as an annoyance and as a much-loved sibling. In her dream she teases him, and wakes up feeling immediately remorseful: “How could she be so mean! Her poor brother was missing! All he’d wanted was a kind word from her, and in the dream she’d laughed at him.”⁴⁴ The next time she awakens, he has returned, brought back by Old Tallow, and Omakayas learns that her dream was true: “Only later [...] did Omakayas realise that Pinch had

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 170.

⁴² Ibid, p. 177.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 182.

⁴⁴ Erdrich, *The Game of Silence*, p. 91.

said he was doing exactly that – hauling rocks. She'd dreamed accurately, but said nothing about it."⁴⁵

The significance of this dream builds on Omakayas' earlier exploration and discovery of her spirit helpers, and links her to Nokomis by their shared ability. It is a further step in Omakayas' maturity and development as an Ojibwe woman. In the fourth novel, this type of premonition-dream alerts an adult Omakayas to the kidnap of her son, Makoons.

Ever since she was a young girl, Omakayas had been visited in her dreams by a protective spirit, a bear woman. That night, the furry and powerful bear woman appeared. Omakayas dreamed that the bear woman crawled in beside her and curled up, speaking sleepily, for she was only now stirring from her winter hibernation. 'Omakayas, my child, your little ones are in danger. The hunters are coming[...]' Omakayas woke with a start.⁴⁶

What we are seeing here in Erdrich's novels is an example of the prophecy that was widespread in Anishinaabe communities in the nineteenth century. In her essay, 'Every Dream is a Prophecy', Cary Miller explains that "for Anishinaabe communities, prophetic prediction formed a part of everyday life, from hunting to marriage to war."⁴⁷ Omakayas' dreams throughout the novels are shown to be prophetic, whether it is her brother hauling rocks, or her son being snatched, and this connects the act of dreaming to the development of the Anishinaabe worldview within the narrative, in which dreams are a significant spiritual event.

The dreams perform several functions in relation to the home, by sustaining the individual and then the family as I have discussed, but also by emphasising the spiritual link

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 92.

⁴⁶ Erdrich, *Chickadee*, pp. 43-44.

⁴⁷ Cary Miller, 'Every Dream is a Prophecy', in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World Through Stories*, ed. by Jill Doerfler, et al., (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2013), pp. 119-132, (p. 120.)

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between the tribe and the environment-as-home. The sense of home that is created by Erdrich appears at first glance to be the fulfilment of Bachelard's idea of the 'hut dream' in which a city man wishes to be in a roundhouse, far from city cares. Bachelard argues that the hut, or an approximation of this 'primitive' building, offers the seclusion man longs for.⁴⁸ We see an enactment of such a dream in *The Little House on the Prairie*. The wildness of the landscape and the Indians that inhabit it forms one of the central conflicts of the novel between fear and fascination. At the beginning of the novel, Pa himself is equated with wildness: "Wild animals would not stay in a country where there were so many people. Pa did not like to stay either"⁴⁹ and travelling to the prairie from the Big Woods is for Pa, at least, an enactment of the 'hut dream'. However, upon reaching a satisfactory spot on the prairie, Pa begins to build his house, or hut in which he shields himself and his family from the wolves and 'wild men' that inhabit the expanse.

The irony in Pa's dream is described by Hamida Bosmajian who suggests Pa "will tame the space in which he would be lost, the animals will flee him, and settlers with similar daydreams will be his neighbours."⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Pa remains a figure caught between the vastness of the prairie and the safety of the house, and on the completion of the work he chooses to remain on the threshold: "he sat for a long time in the doorway and played his fiddle and sang."⁵¹ The prairie is perhaps more frightening for the child, Laura, who is overwhelmed by the expanse around her, and is comforted by the presence of a small building that she spots on the journey:

⁴⁸ Bachelard, *Poetics*, p. 51.

⁴⁹ Wilder, *Little House*, p. 7.

⁵⁰ Hamida Bosmajian, 'Vastness and Contraction of Space in *Little House on the Prairie*' *Children's Literature*, 11 (1983), 49-63, p. 54.

⁵¹ Wilder, *Little House*, p. 91.

All around the wagon there was nothing but empty and silent space. Laura didn't like it [...] At last the wagon was pulling up a slope of earth again, and again there were trees. There was a little log house, too, among the trees. So Laura felt better."⁵²

Bachelard's dream is one of longing for a simpler life, referencing the peacefulness of Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), and the idealisation of living amongst nature. Erdrich portrays a community that longs for their ancestral homeland, but whose dreams do not consist of wistful daydreaming for a simple life. Rather, they are dreams that pertain, in some respects, to basic survival; they also illuminate wider tribal concerns and lead to stronger relationships. They affect the course of the tribe, and as such, the course of the narrative.

The idea of home; the protection it offers, as well as its vulnerability, is threaded throughout the dream sequences. The fifth book of the series, *Makoons*, begins with a dream that sets the course of the narrative. In a prologue entitled 'The Vision', Makoons suffers from a fever and in the process, experiences a vision that shows him the future. He tells his twin brother, Chickadee, what he has seen:

'Last night, I was hot with fever. I could not eat. I was staring out at nothing, when my mind was strangely opened. I saw all that is to happen. I still see it, brother.' 'Tell me,' said Chickadee. 'I am going to get well,' said Makoons, 'but that is not important. We will become strong and bring down buffalo. We'll have horses; we'll feed our people. All of us will travel into the great grass places, toward the western stars. We will never go back east to our lake, our deep woods.' Chickadee's heart pinched, for he loved the trees and water of his old home. 'My brother,' said Makoons. 'That isn't all. We will be tested, too.' 'What is going to happen?' [...] 'I can't see exactly,' said Makoons. His voice failed, tears squeezed from the corners of his eyes. 'My brother,' Makoons whispered. 'We cannot save them all.' So it began – the living out of this vision – which Makoons saw in the early summer of 1866.⁵³

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 11.

⁵³ Louise Erdrich, *Makoons* (New York: Harper, 2016), p. 3.

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The dream takes place in the cabin in which Omakayas, Animiikins, their twins, and adopted daughter live. It is part of a camp that includes Omakayas' mother, grandmother (Nokomis), father, sister, and Two Strike, her cousin. During the buffalo hunts, more people gather at the camp and hunt together, and a hunt occurs shortly after this dream. The vision shows us firstly, a promise for Makoons – that he will get well. His self-deprecation, in suggesting that his own health is not important, again draws emphasis to the wellbeing of the tribe rather than the individual. The certainty with which the people will find food and be taken care of comes next, leaving an unknown danger that will 'test' the tribe. Makoons is unable to see who it is that doesn't survive, or in what way they are tested.

As a narrative device, this dream both demonstrates belief in, and reliance upon, prophecy, and builds tension by giving the reader the expectation that there will be drama and difficulty in the story ahead. Bachelard's idea of the 'hut dream', the primitive roundhouse, and the house that shelters dreaming, are seemingly met in Erdrich's rural, self-sufficient landscape. The irony of course, is that as the political threat of treaties and reservations mount, and disease continues to strike, the home is moved, transformed, and forms part of a larger settlement than the original birchbark house with which the story began. This broadening out of the home-space is critical to understanding the effects of colonial expansion on the tribal way of life as it is portrayed in the novel, even as significant spiritual and cultural acts maintain a distinctly Anishinaabe presence on the landscape. Dreaming, then, is central to the narrative, and to the home, but in Erdrich's writing it is the inverse of Bachelard's theory that is at play. The house doesn't protect the dreamer, the dream (prophecy) protects the house and its inhabitants.

The second element of homeliness is work. The first novel in the series begins with the work of building the house itself, but not only that, the work of sustaining the family takes

place in and around the home. That is to draw a distinction between the paradigm in which one has a job that is away from the home to earn money to keep the home, and to buy food; rather, the home is a product of work and its maintenance, and the sustenance of those who live in it, is carried out largely within and around the home. The home as a site of cultural engagement is also relevant to a discussion of the types of work carried out in the home – traditional practices such as beading, cooking and hospitality are all features of the traditional and contemporary Ojibwe home.

In a study by Tasoulla Hadjiyanni and Kristin Helle of contemporary Ojibwe homes, women were described as “bearers of cultural memory” who “engage in practices that become the visual manifestation of the culture but do so in conditions that make it challenging.”⁵⁴ The study’s findings showed concern with house design that rendered the continuation of Ojibwe cultural practices, such as craft making and hospitality, difficult and to some extent, unsanitary – a legacy of the formation of reservation communities that inhibited traditional Ojibwe home-making. What this study shows in relation to the idea of home being a place of work is the continuation of homely work that Erdrich portrays pre-reservation. By looking at the type of work being carried out in the home it is also possible to gain insight into familial relationships and cultural values. As with other aspects of the narrative, the home-making practices can be read as a connection between the historical world in which Erdrich’s characters reside, and the contemporary moment in which the readers of the novels continue to experience and practice Ojibwe culture.

To consider the types work in and around the home that the novels portray in more detail, this section of the chapter will examine the practice of making clothes and preparing

⁵⁴ Hadjiyanni and Helle, 'Re/claiming the past', p. 477.

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food, activities in which Omakayas regularly participates. To explore the first of these, I am going to use a passage from the first novel, *The Birchbark House* that centres on Omakayas' dislike for tanning moose hide.

Omakayas sat near the cooking fire and slowly, with deep inner fury, ate a bowl of cold stew. She dragged out time waiting for her hateful job to start. Mama was wrestling that hide out of the steam now, where it had been soaking for days and nights, gathering up its scummy, woolly slime. Mama had already set up the dreaded frame of branches and there were strings of hide nearby that she would use to tie the skin up tight so that it could be worked. Omakayas knew how important it was to tan the skin, how her mother would cut up the soft smoked hide and sew on the winter's makazins all summer. She pictured her mother finishing them with lovely, soft toe puckers so the girls' feet could twitch and dance. She could imagine Yellow Kettle beading them, lining them inside with the silkiest rabbit fur and pieces of an old wool blanket. Yes, it was an important task, but Omakayas still didn't want it [...] Omakayas's mother was well known for owning a pair of scissors and other women were always borrowing them [...] "Go fetch me the scissors from Old Tallow," said Omakayas's mother. Without a moment's hesitation, before Mama changed her mind and remembered about the help she needed with the stinky hide, Omakayas ran off.⁵⁵

This passage shows us two things about Omakayas – firstly, her knowledge of the process and its importance for herself and the family, describing in detail the shoes that would be made using the hide, and the dancing that would be done in them. Secondly, it shows that her dislike for the task is severe, her 'inner fury' at having been caught trying to escape the task informing the train of thought of the passage. Phrases such as 'dragged out...hateful...wrestling...scummy...dreaded' build a sense of anticipation and disgust at the task that lies ahead, and also serve to justify and provide contrast to the sense of relief in the realisation that by volunteering to collect the scissors, Omakayas can escape the task. This illuminates Samah Sabra's argument that "home is simultaneously and unevenly a place where

⁵⁵ Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, pp. 16-18.

they [children] are the objects of control and one over which they may exercise control.”⁵⁶ As bildungsroman, the novels explore repeatedly what it means for Omakayas to exert control over her home and environment. In this instance, it is to escape by doing another, preferred, task, but in the later novels the balance of control shifts again and we see her sons expressing the same childish avoidance of chores. Nevertheless, underpinning this adult-child power struggle is a sense that Omakayas or the individual will act for the collective good, and this reflects Ojibwe child-rearing practices which promote “a strong sense of interdependence and mutual responsibility.”⁵⁷ We see this in Omakayas’ acknowledgement that the tanning is an important task, even if it is not enough to convince her, initially, that she should obediently undertake it.

On the way back from collecting the scissors Omakayas encounters bear cubs that she plays with and feeds red berries to, until the mother bear appears and pins her to the ground. It is a frightening experience, and Omakayas puts into practice her knowledge about bears: “Omakayas knew she should stay still, or as still as possible, given the terrified jumping of her heart.”⁵⁸ Omakayas talks to the bear, calling her Nokomis (grandmother), and explaining that she was only playing with the cubs and wanted to adopt them, but now would leave them alone. The strength of feeling Omakayas has for the bear cubs is shown in her reaction to being set free as the bears leave: “Omakayas’s heart squeezed painfully. Even though it was clear her life was to be spared, she felt the loss of her new brothers.”⁵⁹ Omakayas’ closeness to the animals around her has been explored in chapter two, but the key aspect of this encounter in

⁵⁶ Samah Sabra, ‘Re-imagining Home and Belonging: Feminism, Nostalgia and Critical Memory’ *Resources for Feminist Research (RFR/DRF)*, 33 (2008), 79-156, p. 83.

⁵⁷ Carol A. Hand, ‘An Ojibwe Perspective on the welfare of children: Lessons of the past and visions for the future’, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 28 (2006), 20-46, p. 24.

⁵⁸ Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, p. 30.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 32.

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relation to the home is how it shapes her attitude upon return, like a microcosmic version of the A-B-A pattern. When she arrives home, Omakayas takes up the job of tanning the hide without being prompted, and even suggests her older sister should go and play. This extract explains the impact of her experience:

Omakayas concentrated now on the work beneath her hands. She needed to think about what had just happened to her. Boring work was just what she wanted [...] Yes, there was something about what happened that made Omakayas very quiet [...] She kept scraping, gritting her teeth, and held on to her thoughts, for once again she could feel the presence of the powerful mother bear at her shoulder. Although there were no words and although there was no odor of her presence, no bear sounds, no tracks, Omakayas' heart lightened. Turning from her work, she knew the bear had visited her. She knew the bear had followed her home. She knew that when she needed the bear she would be able to call on the bear. The bear had understood something she had said and she had understood something the bear had thought, and although she couldn't tell exactly what, Omakayas turned back to her task with her head clear and her hands cheerful.⁶⁰

The encounter with the bear marks a significant development in Omakayas' spiritual identity and in her connection with the natural world. It is transformative; turning Omakayas from angry and selfish thoughts and actions to reflective, obedient work, taking up the task in order to gain space to think. Omakayas learns that work offers something more than its obvious outcome, and feels connected to the natural world by and through the task. In addition, Omakayas is praised by her family for the work she does, and is promised beautiful shoes that will be made using the hide. This reinforces the importance of the task of clothing the family and affirms Omakayas' role in the family's continued survival, a role that becomes more significant as the novels progress.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 35-6.

Preparing food is another key aspect of work that takes place in the home, and is closely linked to healing because of the act of gathering and cultivating plants and berries, some of which are good to eat, and some of which have healing properties. Nokomis' garden is central to this work and its presence over the course of the novels comes to represent homeliness and stability, a signifier of a steady source of food. It must also be acknowledged in any discussion about food that hunting, which takes place *away* from the home, is also key to the family's survival and features heavily throughout the novels. The preparation of food primarily takes place in the home, which includes that which is sourced through hunting, and the harvesting of foods such as rice which involves a temporary relocation of home as part of the seasonal movement of the tribe.

Nokomis' garden can also be read an emblematic of the disruption to the home that is caused by forced migration. In *The Porcupine Year*, the family are left without food after Albert LaPautre, a relative, aids thieves in a raid on the family. Albert's betrayal temporarily costs Omakayas' father his sight, and everything the family had been carrying to trade. Nokomis' seed garden and medicines are also stolen:

When Nokomis realised that her medicines and her garden had been stolen, she had actually cried. The seeds were her life's work – each was selected over the years from the corn or potato or squash with the vigorous qualities Nokomis coveted. There was no replacing such a treasure.⁶¹

The seeds that Nokomis has so carefully cultivated are representative of the sustaining homelands that the family have been forced to leave. Left with nothing, Nokomis and her family must start again. Though each individual reaction to LaPautre's actions is fierce – Quill vows to hunt him down, Old Tallow vows to scalp him – it is in this time of scarcity that the characters

⁶¹ Erdrich, *The Porcupine Year*, p. 103.

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become stronger. For Yellow Kettle, Omakayas' mother, providing for her youngest child means making clothing with whatever Fishtail can hunt, and in protecting her family, becomes less short-tempered: "It seemed that she was firmer with herself when her little family was in danger."⁶² Quill, who is often a figure of fun, becomes skilled at setting snares for rabbits. Omakayas, with the help of her father, realises that she is almost ready to receive the ceremony that honours her becoming a young woman, and with Nokomis, discovers that she, too, will be a healer.

The home as a site of healing does not imply that for healing to occur, one must be 'at home', rather as I have shown throughout the chapter, homeliness is characterised by the continuation of Ojibwe practices including the gathering of medicines. Omakayas' development as a healer is a recurrent point of discussion in this thesis as it relates to the various themes under consideration – to land and sense of place, to the home-land as a source of food and medicine, her role within the family and an act of apprenticeship, and her own personal story that brings the narrative full circle. The medicines that Nokomis and Omakayas gather in the swamp after being attacked are a source of hope but also of eminent practicality. They venture into the "waabashkiki and set to work [...] assembling all the medicines they would need for the winter."⁶³ It is partly the in-depth knowledge of these natural sources of medicine that enable the family to survive this part of their journey, gradually healing Mikwam (Deydey)'s blindness and enabling the family to continue their journey. Here, the use and adaptation of traditional knowledge enables a sense of homeliness even in dangerous territory; an ability that continues to be developed as the family move closer and closer to what will become their permanent home. By extension, it is these adaptations of cultural practices over

⁶² Ibid, p. 105.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 104.

the course of the narrative that offer a hint of the modes of survivance at work in twenty-first century Anishinaabe culture.

As I discuss in chapter two, the family's circumstantial adoption of the Plains lifestyle is one such example of cultural adaptation, where Nokomis' garden is restored as a symbol of homeliness. Nokomis' stolen seeds are returned to her by another old woman, who had bought them from Albert LaPautre:

The woman had divided her garden seeds with Nokomis. With great joy, Nokomis accepted the seeds – old friends! These were the great-great-grandsons and – granddaughters of the seeds of the plants she'd nurtured so long ago in her gardens on Madeline Island.⁶⁴

The seeds, then, are a connection to the ancestral homeland of Madeline Island; a lifeline of homeliness in a physical and metaphorical sense. The garden is closely tied to Nokomis' identity, and is the place from which she draws strength: "She was frail now, but pushed herself to work every day because of the plants." It is also her final resting place on earth, as she lies down amongst her plants to die, and is buried there by her family: "The family took all the seeds from the garden and then they buried Nokomis there, deeply, wrapped in her blanket [...] nothing to mark where she lay except the exuberant and drying growth of her garden."⁶⁵ For Nokomis, home is where her garden is.

The provision of food is tied closely to hospitality throughout the books; it is at a feast celebration that the stranger is welcomed with devastating consequences. Food is also pivotal to the seasonal movement and the characterisation of the 'home' as un-bordered but closely tied to tribal lands and hunting grounds. Recent work on food sovereignty – that is, the self-determination of a people or government over its food production – connects the colonial

⁶⁴ Erdrich, *Makoons*, p. 21.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 124, 127.

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erasure of traditional hunting grounds, habitats and Indigenous farming methods to a more sustained political undermining of tribal sovereignty. K. P. Whyte argues: “Settler strategies to erase Indigenous food systems, such as salmon habitat, dismantle Indigenous capacities to support their collective self-determination.”⁶⁶ The emphasis on the gathering and preparation of food within the narrative, and its close link to the home-as-dwelling as well as the homeland of the Ojibwe, can be read in relation to Whyte’s claim in two ways. Firstly, as I have shown, the ability to hunt and harvest food away from traditional homelands sustained the family in dangerous territory and enabled them to continue their journey. Following the raid by Albert LaPautre and the thieves, the family rebuild their store of medicines and hunt what they can, culminating in the loss of the elder, Old Tallow, who is killed hunting a bear. In this situation, the family exert food sovereignty over an unfamiliar landscape by relying on traditional knowledge within the context of forced migration. Secondly, the adoption of new practices in the later novels, such as the use of horses in the buffalo hunt, suggest a blended approach to food practices that preserve traditional knowledge as much as possible, such as in the planting of Nokomis’ garden on the Plains. At the series’ end, there is still hope for a return to familiar ways of life as the characters venture towards the Turtle Mountains, whose flora and fauna resemble that found on their island home. Today, there are programmes seeking to restore food sovereignty to Native tribes, such as those supported by the Anishinaabe Food Sovereignty Project.⁶⁷

The home, then, can be read throughout the novels as a site of indigeneity; a space shaped by Anishinaabe culture and by cultural exchange. The connections between the homes

⁶⁶ Kyle Powys Whyte, ‘Food Sovereignty, Justice, and Indigenous Peoples’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Food Ethics*, ed. by Anne Barnhill, Mark Budolfson and Tyler Doggett, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 345-366, Google eBook (page numbers omitted).

⁶⁷ Honor the Earth, Anishinaabe Food Sovereignty Project, <<http://anishinaabefoodsovereignty.com>>.

of the novels and contemporary Anishinaabe cultural memory further the novels' sense of presencing within Ojibwe and settler domestic and literary culture. The homemaking practices encountered in the novel reveal Anishinaabe values and attitudes towards space, place and strangers, emphasising the interconnected and relational way of life that extends hospitality to visitors and a sense of home that includes the wider natural environment. The home is a repository for, and representative of, culture and values, a site of prophetic dreaming; domestic work, and apprenticeship. In the depiction of home as fluid and borderless, Erdrich challenges not only Western norms but also settler assumptions about Anishinaabe culture; offering readers the opportunity to encounter through her fiction the day to day and ceremonial activities that remain central to Ojibwe home life.

Kinship and (Gender) Identity

Kinship, by which I refer to relationships within both tribe and family unit, is arguably one of the central themes of the novels, indeed, of Ojibwe life, as Michael McNally explains: “Ojibwe personhood was and is decisively relational in nature. Subjectivity and identity remain functions of a person’s relations to other persons [...] [in] a world where the collective, not the individual, is the basic unit.”¹ This recognition of the collective permeates the novels, with an emphasis throughout on the effect of one’s actions on the group as a whole. This can be seen in aspects of Omakayas’ development, and in the values demonstrated through the day to day life of the family. The importance of the collective unit is perhaps exemplified most clearly through the person of Gichi Noodin, a relatively minor character who nonetheless is significant for his banishment from the tribe after almost costing them a crucial buffalo hunt. Gichi Noodin ignores the rules and the leaders of the hunt, making a dangerous manoeuvre that almost scares the buffalo away.² His story also becomes demonstrative of other kinship values - redemption and adoption - when later on in the novel, he redeems himself by returning to the tribe a changed man, having saved the life of Opichi, and is welcomed into the family: “Omakayas said from the beginning that he had saved her sister’s child, who was also her child in the Ojibwe tradition, and that in this way he had become family.”³ By rescuing Omakayas’ niece, Gichi Noodin shows that he has learnt from his mistakes and has rejected his earlier self-centredness in order to adopt the values of community that characterise the tribe.

¹ Michael D. McNally, *Honoring Elders: Aging, Authority, and Ojibwe Religion*, Religion and American Culture Series, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 46.

² Louise Erdrich, *Makoons*, (New York: Harper, 2016), pp. 119-20.

³ *Ibid*, p. 146.

This chapter will explore the ways in which Erdrich places family at the epicentre of the novels, both as a device that drives the plot of the metanarrative, and as a representation of the extended kinship network that defines Ojibwe life and differs from Western nuclear family structures. Throughout the novels, as I shall demonstrate, Erdrich simultaneously engages with conventional gender roles whilst at the same time exploring the ways in which these roles are fluid and often subverted. By exploring the themes of kinship and gender identity this chapter will argue that the novels engage the reader in a deeper understanding of Ojibwe culture and history both pre- and post-contact.

The size of Anishinabe families and its rootedness in the seasonal round was an obstacle to the efforts of assimilationists at the turn of the nineteenth century.⁴ The political and social organisation of tribes, arranged as it was through extended networks of kinship, was at odds with the nascent domestication project of the United States that served its policies of expansion and assimilation.⁵ American political theory at that time regarded the household as the foundation of society, to such an extent that homes that did not fit the domestic ideal – homes that they perceived to be in disarray – were “threats to the nation.”⁶ The kinship structure of tribes, who lived in extended family groups across large areas, was therefore in opposition to the project of ‘domestication’ that sought to fit each discreet family unit into the Western nuclear family structure. The family unit and wider kinship network of the tribe were so entwined that assimilationists of the Jacobin state⁷ believed that tribes, as competing

⁴ McNally, *Honoring Elders*, p. 146.

⁵ M. M. Slaughter, ‘Contested Identities: The Adoption of American Indian Children and the Liberal State’, *Social and Legal Studies*, 9.2 (2000), 277-248, p. 242.

⁶ Cathleen D. Cahill, *Federal Fathers and Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), p. 38.

⁷ A Jacobin state is one in which orientation and identity is to the state, not sub-groups within the state. See Sarah Sargent, ‘Truth and Consequences: Law, Myth and Metaphor in American Indian Contested Adoption’, *Liverpool Law Review*, 38 (2017), 47-61, p. 48.

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sovereign entities, must be destroyed and that this could be achieved by breaking up the Indian family, cultivating “children’s allegiance to the United States rather than to the tribe.”⁸

McNally explains that these broad kinship structures are still in place today:

Extended families have been and remain the key institution — arguably even the operative social unit — of Anishinaabe communities, and this is in increasing relief over time with a wider society organised to consider the individual as the indivisible social unit.⁹

With this in mind, the wide kinship network present in this series, and indeed in much of Erdrich’s adult fiction would be recognisable to Anishinaabe communities and families today. This is a further example of how the texts, as fictionalised history, relate to present-day Anishinaabe children and would as a result offer a mirror or window to the reader depending on their background.

The family tree of the novels reflects the complexity of encompassing a wide kinship network. I am conscious of the limitations of dividing the extended family network of the novels into discreet units, and recognise that although the families can be characterised as separate, it is not in the same sense that one understands the settler-colonial nuclear structure of the family unit. However, for the purposes of understanding the relationship between the main characters, who themselves are situated within a broader village and tribe, I have found it helpful to recognise family units who live separately and in some cases, miles apart. The following overview of the family group as presented in the novels illustrates this:

Nokomis (grandmother) is the eldest family member. She has a daughter, Yellow Kettle who is married to Mikwam / Ice (Deydey). Their children are Angeline, Omakayas (adopted),

⁸ Beth H. Piatote, *Domestic Subjects: Gender, Citizenship, and Law in Native American Literature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 5.

⁹ McNally, p. 125.

Pinch, Neewo (d.1847), and Bizheens (adopted). Yellow Kettle's sister is Akewaynzee, who has children named as Tatah, Two Strike, and 'older brothers'. After the death of Yellow Kettle's sister, Two Strike is sent to live with Auntie Muskrat by her father, who is unnamed. Muskrat is married to Albert LaPautre, who was formerly married to Wishkob. They have two children, Little Bee and Twilight, and now Two Strike. Elsewhere, Red Thunder (Miskobines) has a son called Animikiins, who later marries Omakayas. His mother, Red Thunder's wife, is killed by neighbouring tribe the Bwaanag (Dakota) and they are introduced as the 'raggedy ones', arriving at the beginning of the second novel, *The Game of Silence*, in 1849, precipitating the movement of the rest of the family. It is also at this time that Bizheens is adopted by Mikwam and Yellow Kettle. Red Thunder has a brother, Day Thunder, and he has a son, Fishtail, who is Animikiins' cousin and married to Angeline's friend Ten Snow. Ten Snow dies of smallpox during *The Birchbark House* and over time, Angeline and Fishtail fall in love and are married. They adopt a child called Opichi. Two orphaned English children are discovered, given the names Zahn and Zozed, and carried with the family on their perilous journey but are lost when they are captured in a raid. Later, when Omakayas is a mother to twins Makoons and Chickadee, she adopts Zozie, who is the daughter of Two Strike. Old Tallow, described as a "warrior lady"¹⁰ is uniquely related as the rescuer of Omakayas, but is by choice on the boundary of this extended family network: "Although she lived in town, Old Tallow was so isolated by the force and strangeness of her personality that she could have been surrounded by a huge dark forest."¹¹ Old Tallow's 'strangeness' keeps her on the periphery of the family group to which she is mutually bound. She is respected as an elder, is an almost constant presence in Omakayas' early life, and is a reliable hunter and provider. Later in the chapter, I will consider

¹⁰ Louise Erdrich, *The Game of Silence*, (New York: Harper Trophy, 2006), p. 71.

¹¹ Louise Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, (New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1999, repr. 2002), p. 19.

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how the characters of Old Tallow and Two-Strike display characteristics of gender variance, but first this chapter will explore adoption, which recurs throughout the novels.

Omakayas is rescued as an orphan from an island on which everyone else has perished from smallpox. Discovered by Old Tallow's then-husband, Hat, she is at first ignored by the party of men who are described as too afraid to rescue her, fearful of disease. Instead it is Old Tallow, upon hearing of their discovery, who rows out to rescue the infant, and she is adopted into the family of Yellow Kettle and Mikwam. Significantly, this is not revealed to Omakayas until she becomes the only member of her family to be unaffected by smallpox, and questions why. Then, Old Tallow reveals the truth: "They took you as their daughter, loved you as their daughter, you are a daughter to them."¹² The matter of Omakayas' parentage is not discussed anywhere else in the novels, and she does not wonder about the family she might have had. This is the first step in the novels towards naturalising the process of adoption, which Erdrich continues to do by repeating the process over generations of the same family. One of the ways in which adoption is naturalised is simply by it being unremarkable. In other stories, the adoption itself could become the catalyst for soul-searching or adventure, but the focus in these novels is very much on the family unit *as it exists at the time*, a fluid, not fixed entity. Other similar adoptions are likewise naturalised; for Angeline and Fishtail, the adoption of Opichi is described as a gift, "given to them to brighten the world."¹³ Bizheens, the baby adopted by Omakayas' parents, is a comfort to them after the loss of their own infant, Neewo, to smallpox. Adoption in the context of settler-indigenous relations has been described as a "tool for settler society to infiltrate and dismantle indigenous communities."¹⁴ Erdrich, by

¹² Ibid, p. 234.

¹³ Erdrich, *Makoons*, p. 23.

¹⁴ Shelbi Nahwilet Meissner and Kyle Powys Whyte, 'Theorising Indigeneity, Gender and Settler Colonialism' in *the Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Race* ed. by Paul C Taylor, Linda Martin Alcoff, and Luve Anderson (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 12.

contrast, primarily offers a view of adoption that reinforces the breadth of Anishinaabe kinship that is rooted in action, as Daniel Heath Justice argues, “kinship is best thought of as a verb rather than as a noun,”¹⁵ and one that *extends* rather than limits (by removal) the survival of community.

The adoption of orphans by other families of the same tribe is the most common example of adoption within the narrative, reflecting that, for the Ojibwe, adoption is a “matter of hospitality, responsibility and survival.”¹⁶ Erdrich also explores the idea of inter-tribal adoption as a reparation for war. In *The Porcupine Year*, when Omakayas is still a child, the party of Ojibwe meet the Bwaanag (Dakota), whose chief lost a son at the hands of the Anishinaabe. To make peace, Animikiins replaces the lost son for one year. Erdrich also explores this practice in her 2016 novel, *LaRose*, in which the traditional practice of replacing a lost child occurs in the twenty-first century. The principal act of the novel takes place on the border of the reservation and the town, when Landreaux Iron, an Ojibwe hunter, accidentally shoots and kills the five year old son of his best friend and neighbour, Peter. Landreaux offers his son LaRose as an atonement, which precipitates the novel's exploration of healing and the generational pain caused by successive acts of colonisation. In this way the novel demonstrates Raymond Bucko's idea of “tradition as a dialectic between past and present”¹⁷ as it grapples with conflicting ideas about grief and reparation. Erdrich describes this process in the acknowledgements of *LaRose* as “a contemporary act that echoes an old form of justice.”¹⁸ Invoking this tradition, for the protagonist of *LaRose*, is the only way to come to terms with the

¹⁵ Daniel Heath Justice, “Go Away Water!”: Kinship Criticism and the Decolonisation Imperative, in *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*, ed. by Craig S. Womack, Daniel Heath Justice, and Christopher B. Teuton (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), pp. 147-168, p. 150.

¹⁶ Seema Kurup and Linda Wagner-Martin, eds, *Understanding Louise Erdrich*, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2016), p. 76.

¹⁷ McNally, *Honoring Elders*, p. 4.

¹⁸ Louise Erdrich, *LaRose* (London: Corsair, 2016), p. 373.

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grief of the loss of his neighbour's son at his own hand, but also the grief of the second loss, of his own son, whom he gives as a substitute.

Erdrich specifically examines inter-tribal adoption in these novels, which is unique in the context of Native fiction more broadly. Authors such as Sherman Alexie focus on adoption — in *Indian Killer* (1996) and *Flight* (2007) —, and Leslie Marmon Silko in *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999), but the focus is on extra-tribal adoption, that of Native children into white families and as Cynthia Callahan observes of Silko's depiction, "more akin to captivity than rescue."¹⁹ Later on, I discuss the attitude of Catholic nuns towards indigenous children, and the politics surrounding inter-racial adoption, but more overtly, the intra and inter-tribal adoption of this series serves to emphasise the everydayness of adoption and cooperative parenting within a tribal group.

Within the novels, Omakayas' adoption of Zoie introduces the idea of gender variance and alternative performances of gender roles. Omakayas, who initially resented her cousin, becomes so close to Two Strike that she calls her 'sister' and adopts Zoie, Two Strike's daughter. In *Makoons* Zoie is introduced as an "adopted big sister and Omakayas' treasured daughter."²⁰ In an earlier novel we learn that "Zoie called three different women Nimama, and nobody thought that strange."²¹ Zoie is raised primarily by Omakayas, but collectively also by her biological mother and Omakayas' sister Angeline. Zoie's adoption is perhaps more remarkable than Omakayas' for the fact that her biological mother actively rejected the role of motherhood, but is very much still alive and still part of the family group. There is a sense of fleeting bitterness when Two Strike demonstrates uncharacteristic tenderness towards a lamb:

¹⁹ Cynthia Callahan, *Kin of Another Kind: Transracial Adoption in American Literature*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press, 2011), p. 114.

²⁰ Erdrich, *Makoons*, p. 18.

²¹ Louise Erdrich, *Chickadee*, (New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 2012), p. 20.

“Obviously, Two Strike couldn’t feel this way about any human being, including her own daughter,”²² but the overarching theme is one of acceptance – both of Zoie into Omakayas’ care and Two Strike as a hunter. Two Strike is described as “a powerful, arrogant storm of a woman” and more closely resembles Old Tallow’s ways than those of her immediate family. Through the characters of Two-Strike and Old Tallow, there is a constant presence of women who fulfil a non-binary role, and who at different points become saviour figures for the families in time of need.

Their presence on the edge of the family group is suggested by the narrative to be a result of their personalities, but there is also a broader logic behind their portrayal that can be understood in light of settler-colonial influences on Native treatment of gender and sexuality, and Erdrich’s own recognisable commitment to representing the multiple possibilities for gender identity (that were once acceptable in many Native communities), within the limits of twenty-first century American children’s fiction which is often inherently conservative. Therefore, the gender roles on display throughout the narrative, though apparently conventional in a Western sense (in terms of demarcated male/female roles and responsibilities), reflect a deeper understanding of the “Indigenous knowledges in which multiple genders and sexualities are culturally appropriate rather than radically transgressive.”²³

The division of labour in the novel, where men hunt and trade, the women prepare food, keep house, grow plants, and raise children, reflects Euro-western norms but also a tribally-specific understanding of the ways in which activities were gendered and fluid, as Meissner and Whyte explain:

²² Erdrich, *Makoons*, p. 27.

²³ Lisa Tatonetti, *The Queerness of Native American Literature* (St Paul, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) [page numbers omitted from digital text].

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The Ojibwe gender system positioned men and women differently as stewards of key environmental resources with gendered knowledge as well as gendered connections to the landscape – but also admitted of fluidities that are impermissible in some more rigid gender systems.²⁴

Much has been written about the gender variance in Erdrich's adult fiction, and I would argue that what Erdrich is doing here is continuing a pattern of disruption that is observable in her earlier novels. *Two Strike* and *Old Tallow* provide us with alternative gender performances which broaden the spectrum of gender identity, so despite apparent conformity to both Western and Anishinaabe values, Erdrich is willing to both present and disrupt notions of stable gender identity. Catherine Rosenthal, referring to the tetralogy of *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks* and *The Bingo Palace* writes: "Gender can be destabilised by inserting difference into homogenous representations."²⁵ Erdrich's 'homogenous representations', in this context, are the gender-normative roles displayed throughout the novels that conform to Anishinaabe and Western ideas about gender identity and performance. This echoes a similar tact in Sherman Alexie's writing, which Tatonetti explores. Referring to Alexie's short stories *The Toughest Indian in the World* and *Indian Country*, Tatonetti describes the "heteronormative safety net" as "each story's subsequent exploration of queer desire and identity are, at least to some degree, mediated by the narrator and main character's seemingly grounded heterosexual identity."²⁶ Before showing how *Two Strike* and *Old Tallow* subvert traditional roles, this chapter will consider the gender-normative roles and attitudes that are present in the novels.

²⁴ Meissner and Whyte, 'Theorising Indigeneity,' p. 4.

²⁵ Catherine Rosenthal, *Narrative Deconstructions of Gender in works by Audrey Thomas, Daphne Marlatt, and Louise Erdrich* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2003), p. 16.

²⁶ Lisa Tatonetti, 'Sex and Salmon: Queer Identities in Sherman Alexie's *The toughest Indian in the World*' *Studies in American Fiction*, 35.2 (2007), 201-219, p. 202.

Erdrich shows the female children, especially Omakayas, to be nurturing and calm, in contrast to her younger brother Pinch (later Quill), who causes mischief and is loud. This can be seen in a sequence in *The Game of Silence*, in which Omakayas' game is interrupted by Pinch.

Their boys and girls were made out of reeds and corn husks. They slept on tiny mats near the fire and ate stick-mud stew from off flat rocks [...] The girls smoothed down the leaf bedcovers and sang lullabies, gently smoothing back their children's invisible hair [...] Wham! As though a tornado slammed into the hut, the girls went tumbling every which way [...] Even before she saw him, Omakayas knew that Pinch was the burst of bad weather that destroyed their play world.²⁷

In this passage Omakayas and her friends are acting out an imitation of motherhood, providing their reed children with warmth, food and comfort. The disruption of the idyllic game of house emphasises by contrast the wild, forceful nature of Pinch and his disregard for his sister's game. This is also one of the instances where Omakayas' relationships with her family are most relatable to the young reader – in the day to day games and sibling interaction, the reader, who has or has had similar incidences in their own life, is perhaps most able to identify with the protagonists, and so develop empathy.

The division of work according to gender is also apparent in the novel, and from the beginning we see women preparing hides that the men have brought, making the house, and tending a garden. In *The Porcupine Year*, dusk is described as “a good time for *boys* to hunt” and in *Chickadee*, Animikiins is hunting and “ordinarily [...] would have taken the *boys* along so they could learn to hunt by his side.” (emphases mine).²⁸ The work of preparing what has been hunted is done in family groups, the women preparing the hides of the buffalo the men have

²⁷ Erdrich, *The Game of Silence*, p. 39.

²⁸ Louise Erdrich, *The Porcupine Year* (New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 2008), p. 76, and *Chickadee*, p. 2.

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killed. Two Strike, eager to avoid tanning, saves the hide in pieces for Omakayas and Zoizie: “Perhaps she could bribe them or work on their sympathies.”²⁹ Earlier on in the series, while Omakayas is still a child, we are given examples of ‘women’s work’ through the oppositional attitudes of Two-Strike and Omakayas. Over a number of pages, the argument builds as Two-Strike refuses the tasks she is given in the ricing camp: “Two Strike was angry about the fact that she was asked to do women’s work [...] Two Strike struck a warrior’s pose and spoke. ‘What of it? I’m going to get meat. What do I care what you little ladies do?’”³⁰ Two-Strike’s outright rejection of the feminine role is compounded by her achievement in shooting a moose: “This sort of thing just didn’t happen – a girl making a grown male warrior’s shot – [...] now, for sure, nobody expected her to do women’s work. Not anymore. Two Strike was free.”³¹ Omakayas’ jealousy of Two Strike is apparent and causes her to get into trouble, whilst Two Strike is celebrated and considered blessed.

The designation of women’s work as something to be ‘free’ from appears to privilege the male role of hunter over the more nurturing, but labour intensive, work of women. When Omakayas is told go back to her ‘woman’s work’ by Two Strike, she exclaims that ‘women’s work is hard!’³² In her resentment, Omakayas lists all the work she is still bound to, in comparison to Two-Strike’s ‘freedom’: “turn rice over a hot fire [...] haul water and stack wood [...] look after the littlest children and make sure they didn’t burn themselves or wander off.” By contrast Two-Strike is free to “hunt [...] fish [...] do whatever she liked.”³³ Despite so-called women’s work being hard, one tribal member, Gichi Noodin, (who, as I have discussed, later

²⁹ Erdrich, *Makoons*, p. 57.

³⁰ Erdrich, *The Game of Silence*, p. 76.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 82.

³² *Ibid*, p. 114.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 82.

redeems himself) uses the word 'girl' in a derogatory way to confer inferiority and weakness: "Gichi Noodin looked down at Makoons disdainfully. Next to him, Two Strike busied herself. 'Stay home, little girls,' Gichi Noodin said to them both."³⁴ At the point in the narrative when this is spoken, Two Strike is known for being a proficient hunter – "as adept [...] as any man, and better than most."³⁵ Noodin's misogyny is uncommon in the context of the rest of the narrative, but reflects an important diversity in the reception of and attitude towards two-spirit people within Native communities. Men in particular were wary of being undermined by a woman who was a greater warrior or hunter than he.³⁶ Through the character of Noodin, Erdrich acknowledges attitudes that are not conducive to the sharing of Anishinaabe values in order to counter them. This is achieved by showing either how those attitudes affect the character negatively (his comeuppance), or to offer an alternative character's viewpoint who better reflects the values of the tribe. Throughout the novels, Erdrich repeatedly emphasises the fluidity of gender roles with importance placed on work that benefits the community as a whole, rather than the gender identity of the individual.

Indeed, the role of women as providers and nurturers is honoured in the novels and can be seen in these two examples. Firstly, the concept of women's work being inferior to the excitement of hunting is mitigated in this extract from *Makoons*, where the boys are seen dreaming while the women carry out important tasks:

As the boys fantasised that they were mighty, grown-up invincible warriors and lived in their own world of their own making once the camp stopped moving, Omakayas, Zozie and Angeline worked ceaselessly. They put the camp up, they took the camp down.

³⁴ Erdrich, *Makoons*, p. 42.

³⁵ Erdrich, *The Porcupine Year*, p. 147.

³⁶ Roger M. Carpenter, 'Womanish Men and Manlike Women: The Native American Two-spirit as Warrior', in *Gender and Sexuality in Indigenous North America 1400-1850*, ed. by Sandra Slater and Fay A. Yarbrough, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina University Press, 2010) p. 158.

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They dug roots, picked berries, plucked geese and ducks, stitched clothing, worked on hides and governed the children. In their precious spare time, the women beaded.³⁷

The productivity that is vital to the wellbeing of the whole camp is here shown to be the 'ceaseless' work of women, complementary to the hunting skills of the men. As Brenda Child has observed: "Ojibwe women lived in a society that valued an entire system of beliefs associated with women's work, not just the product of their labour."³⁸ Two-Strike, who hunts with the men, "joined the women occasionally, whittling knife handles or repairing arrows."³⁹ Though engaged in masculine tasks, Two Strike keeps company with the women, echoing Will Roscoe's argument that "gender-variant individuals often participated in masculine or feminine roles and were not discriminated against for doing so," and further reinforcing a sense of equality between the tasks being undertaken.⁴⁰

The second example is Nokomis, the grandmother whose garden is so important to the life of the family in the early novels. During the migration to the Plains, she transports her garden as seeds which are stolen, and then sold back to her, and at the end of her life she reflects: "'Just think,' she said, 'this is my own garden, come to life again, after all the years we have spent wandering.' [...] Nokomis was proud that she, an old woman, was providing for her family."⁴¹ Providing food, shelter and clothing is not only the role of men, but is shown to be a task that is shared by men and women in different, but complementary roles.

Two Strike engages in masculine pursuits, but crosses gender boundaries through her repetition of acts that are constituted by the tribe as masculine or feminine. Nokomis' pride in

³⁷ Erdrich, *Makoons*, p. 106.

³⁸ Brenda J. Child, *Holding Our World Together: Ojibwe Women and the Survival of Community* (New York: Viking, 2012), p. xv.

³⁹ Erdrich, *Makoons*, p. 107.

⁴⁰ Will Roscoe, 'Bibliography of berdache and alternative gender roles among North American Indians,' *Journal of Homosexuality* 14.3-4, (1987), pp. 81-172, quoted in Meissner and Whyte, p. 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, pp. 124-5.

her ability to provide for her family as 'an old woman' implies that she is exceeding the expected limitations of an aged woman, but perhaps more importantly, embodies the teaching that everyone can contribute to the wellbeing of the tribe. She also reflects the value placed on eldership and experience. This is particularly pertinent to the novels as children's fiction, because one of the ways in which an ethos of difference is celebrated throughout the novels is not just by troubling fixed notions of gender, or age, but celebrating the individual and their place - their relationship - within this wide kinship network.

Physical appearance can also be read as a signifier, not just of gender, but of the performativity of gender roles. In *Makoons*, the braided hair worn by men represents gendered ideas about appearance: "She [Omakayas] did not want others to see her men messy-headed – neatly braided hair was a sign someone cared for you."⁴² In this example, Omakayas takes pride in the appearance of 'her men', as it reflects something of her role as caregiver. Later on in the same novel, however, Erdrich exposes the precariousness of appearance as a signifier, through an encounter between Quill and Gichi Noodin.

Quill has prepared a feast for everyone after the buffalo hunt, which is used to suggest that he has feminine qualities:

"My son has surprising skills," declared Yellow Kettle [...] "Yes, he would make someone a good wife," said Gichi Noodin. Quill froze. So did the other men. The twins even stopped eating, hoping that Quill would spring up and fight [...] "Gichi Noodin! You would make a good wife too," said Quill, amiably. "You tend your looks enough for two people. Watch out so girls marry you for love, not just to get your pretty clothes." Gichi Noodin smiled, because everyone was laughing, but it was clear he didn't quite get the joke.⁴³

⁴² Erdrich, *Makoons*, p. 12.

⁴³ *Ibid*, pp. 65-66.

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In this encounter, Quill, who has been likened to the trickster figure,⁴⁴ uses laughter to dispel tension when his cooking skills are negatively associated with being a wife. Although there is a danger in over-simplifying Quill's character by reading him as a trope, the trickster's qualities and humour are displayed throughout the novels through Pinch/Quill, which in turn informs the novels' connection between humour and survivance.⁴⁵ His retort also expresses something beyond a simple rebuttal of a gendered insult. It can be read as a form of teasing, which Lincoln discusses in relation to Vine Deloria's writing: "Teasing is key to Indian bonding, Deloria notes; it serves as a daily check-and-balance on tribal norms."⁴⁶ With this in mind, the exchange, and the suggestion that Noodin 'didn't quite get the joke,' also further indicates Gichi Noodin's status as an outsider – something he can only overcome through personal sacrifice and adoption.

This short passage encapsulates what appears to be the core of gender representation in the five texts: a simultaneous expression of conformity to given gender roles, and an exposure of the fissures in gender identity that show those 'conventional' roles to be fluid, offering a more nuanced Ojibwe understanding of gender performance. Through this exchange, I argue that Erdrich is taking existing gender norms and destabilising them, exposing them, in Butler's terms, as 'nonnatural and nonnecessary' by putting them in a context that "defies normative expectation."⁴⁷ The negative response expressed by the characters actually enhances the sense in which these norms are shown to be false, and the laughter with which Quill diffuses the insult could also be read in the context of Butler's argument that laughter

⁴⁴ Michelle Pagni Stewart, "'Counting Coup" on Children's Literature about American Indians: Louise Erdrich's Historical Fiction', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 38.2 (2013), 215-235, p. 226.

⁴⁵ For further discussion of Pinch/Quill as trickster and the role of laughter, see chapter 1.

⁴⁶ Lincoln, *Indi'n Humor*, p. 25.

⁴⁷ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 218.

follows the loss of the 'normal' and the realisation that there is in fact, no original ideal (gender) that one can embody.⁴⁸

The influence of boarding schools, which were used by white reformers to assimilate Native children into European culture, included gender roles in their mission, "replacing fluid gender norms with disciplined middle-class Euro-American expectations of women and men."⁴⁹ Although boarding schools do not feature in the novels, the time period in which the story takes place is on the cusp of the introduction of the first residential schools, and it is possible to see how the family and gender structure of the novels would be affected by the imposition of such assimilation policies. In the earlier novels, the children have the opportunity to attend a mission school where they learn to write in English, and later in the chapter I discuss boarding schools in the context of assimilation in loco parentis.

The "fluid gender norms" on display in Erdrich's novels do not eliminate the need for structure and gender-specific roles, but instead offer multiple possibilities for expression of binary and non-binary forms of gender, including, I will argue, the presence of two-spirit people in the characters of Two-Strike and Old Tallow. Sabine Lang offers a helpful definition of two-spirit in the context of Native American culture:

Becoming a two-spirit male or female [...] was, and is, a matter of occupational preferences and personality traits, not of sexual orientation. Two-Spirit people are seen as being neither men nor women, but as belonging to genders of their own within cultural systems of multiple genders.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (London: Routledge, 1990, repr. 2015), p. 189.

⁴⁹ McNally, *Honoring Elders*, p. 147.

⁵⁰ Sabine Lang, 'Various Kinds of Two Spirit People: Gender Variance and Homosexuality in Native American Communities', in *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*, ed. by Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas and Sabine Lang, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), pp. 100-118, (p. 114).

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Lang's definition helpfully situates the two-spirit individual within a 'cultural system' in which multiple genders existed. The term two-spirit is itself problematic because, although coined in English by Native individuals to encompass homosexuals as well as the 'alternatively gendered', it does not adequately reflect the wide variety in terminology used by different tribes, and it conflates homosexuality with gender mixing, which are not equally acceptable amongst all Native people. It also translates into troubling terms in some Native languages such as 'neither living nor dead' (Navajo), 'ghost' (Shoshoni) or 'witch' (Zuni).⁵¹ The term previously used to describe gender variants is 'berdache' which is a colonial term that has negative connotations, from the French for 'male prostitute', and is now viewed as inappropriate and offensive by Native Americans and anthropologists.⁵² The term two-spirit, despite its limitations, is the term now conventionally used and mindful of its complicated history, it is the term I use in this chapter to refer to characters who occupy alternative genders.

The existence of the two-spirit person allows for a third and fourth gender (male-female and female-male), both occupying a position of liminality. James Iovannone also refers to the idea of liminality in relation to the character of Agnes/Father Damien in *The Last Report of the Miracles at Little No Horse* (1999), describing Agnes as occupying a liminal space that "transcends both masculine and feminine identity markers."⁵³ The border position of the two-spirit characters in the novels is literally reflected in the novel by a physical boundary between the two-spirit characters and the rest of the family group – in one of the later novels, we are

⁵¹ Sabine Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998), pp. xv-xvi.

⁵² J. James Iovannone, "'Mix-Ups, Messes, Confinements, and Double-Dealings": Transgendered Performances in Three Novels by Louise Erdrich', *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 21:1 (Spring 2009), 38-68, pp. 40-41.

⁵³ Iovannone, *Transgendered Performances*, p. 61.

told they “both live alone in the woods.”⁵⁴ In the case of Two Strike, her difference is underscored by the conformity of Omakayas to conventional gender roles.

When Two Strike is introduced, the novels are focalised through Omakayas and so the reader comes to understand Two Strike's character in relation to her. Initially, their behaviour is seen in contrast. From the outset, the reader learns that Two Strike “had to be forced to do the things girls normally did, and her mother and grandma had finally given up on her.”⁵⁵ This shows us that there are expectations for girls which Two Strike doesn't meet, and the extent to which she refuses the female role has exasperated her elders to the point of giving up, which is contrary to the pattern we see for eldership elsewhere. Eldership refers to a role within the tribe, held by individuals who are recognised for their wisdom and leadership. Indeed, a little further on in the same passage, we see Two Strike weaving reed mats with Omakayas “because she was ordered to do it by Grandma.”⁵⁶ What this suggests is that the ‘giving up’ refers to enforcing a particular gender role, rather than a total loss of obedience and instruction. Shared frustration over a common chore brings the girls together, eventually becoming such good friends that “they called each other sister”⁵⁷ reflecting a closeness, but not sameness.

In the context, it is important to make the distinction between a person's sexual and gender identities and notable that within the novels, Erdrich portrays gender variance but not sexual difference. Within Native American cultures, as Lang explains, homosexuality is not commonly accepted whereas two-spirit people were traditionally respected.⁵⁸ The relationship between settler-colonialism, displacement, and identity needs further consideration to

⁵⁴ Erdrich, *Chickadee*, p. 51.

⁵⁵ Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, p. 95.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 97.

⁵⁷ Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, p. 98.

⁵⁸ Lang, 'Various Kinds of Two-Spirit People', in Jacobs, Thomas and Lang, (1997), p. 111.

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understand how Erdrich's novels appear to hover on the borders of affirming and repressing sexual identity; both affirming multiple gender identities whilst resisting, to some degree, the acknowledgement of sexual difference. Daniel Heath Justice writes: "When one is uprooted from ancestral lands, the next landscape under siege becomes the body and its identities."⁵⁹ Positing the body as a site of colonisation, Justice's argument has echoes in Meissner and Whyte's assertion that:

"The internalisation of settler heteropatriarchal values has caused many Indigenous nations to adopt laws banning same sex marriages and tribal community members to voice hatred for non-heterosexual and/or non-binary identities."⁶⁰

Erdrich's honouring of Two-Strike and Tallow reflects then, a step towards re-evaluating the position of gender-variant individuals, following her explorations of marginal and LGBTQ2 characters in her adult novels. Again, it raises the question of what the limits are of children's fiction – perceived or actual – in depicting what Tatonetti describes as "non-dominant histories [...] the fact that many indigenous cultures traditionally included multiple gender categories and alternate constructions of sexuality." This question is worthy of further research and investigation, but is beyond the bounds of this thesis to examine in full detail.⁶¹ In relation to Erdrich's portrayal of religion and kinship networks in her adult fiction, in which she holds to both Catholic and Native spiritualities, and tribal and nuclear family structures, Catherine Rainwater suggests that Erdrich destabilises the reader by subverting their expectations of the novels' position, forcing them to "pause 'between worlds' to discover the arbitrary structural

⁵⁹ Justice, p. 160.

⁶⁰ Meissner and Whyte, p. 17.

⁶¹ Tatonetti, 'Sex and Salmon', p. 204.

principles of both."⁶² I suggest that this same destabilisation of assumptive gender norms throughout the novels does something similar.

The ways in which Two-Strike and Old Tallow are treated within the novels is intertwined with a specific understanding of eldership, which this chapter will consider in relation to gender variance. Two-Strike's rejection of the feminine role manifests, at times, as disobedience. Incidents of disobedience and punishment provide insight into the way in which the structure of eldership works across the extended kin network. In the occurrence below, Two Strike disrespects Omakayas' mother, resulting in fury:

The girl strode into the clearing like she owned it and frowned. 'Izhadah. Let's go,' she ordered him, abruptly, just as Yellow Kettle came around the corner. 'I'll say when to go,' Yellow Kettle told her niece. Omakayas [...] turned to see Two Strike glaring at her mother. 'He's coming with me,' said Two Strike, imperiously [...] Omakayas realised that when her mother was mad in times past, she hadn't been really mad. In fact, Omakayas saw that she had never really known her mother mad, even at Pinch [...] There was no explosion, there was no thunder, there were no words, only power.⁶³

In this situation Two Strike makes an assertion of power that she does not have, and directly contradicts her elder, her aunt; who is in charge of the group of children at the time. Yellow Kettle's response is interesting in its difference to what one might expect – she does not speak, but removes Two Strike forcibly by carrying her, silently, away to her adoptive mother. This shows that Yellow Kettle defers punishment to the child's parent, and in the following conversation between Omakayas and Nokomis, it becomes clear that parenting, including discipline, is approached holistically:

'Two Strike has an unusual destiny,' said Nokomis, 'we have been watching her. We think it could go either way.' Omakayas didn't grasp the meaning of what her grandma said, but she could tell that Nokomis was carefully choosing her words. 'She has her

⁶² Rainwater, 'Reading Between Worlds,' p. 422.

⁶³ Erdrich, *The Game of Silence*, p. 122.

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grandfather's spirit, and as you know, he was a grand warrior and an excellent negotiator, who secured this island for us and made certain of our trading partners. She has his fire, but she is young and she lacks his ability to focus the flame. She needs guidance.'⁶⁴

This excerpt gives an insight into the character of Two Strike and the way in which her behaviour is understood as two-spirit. Described as having the spirit of her grandfather, her attributes follow a patriarchal line and the comparison to her grandfather's warrior skills suggest that it is possible for Two Strike to follow in his footsteps. This suggestion confounds Omakayas' desire to see her cousin punished for insolence, and is an example of the way in which Erdrich uses Omakayas to display Western gender-normative tendencies in order to question and explain an indigenous acceptance of difference.

The acceptance of Two-Strike as two-spirit within the novels does not come at the expense of proper order, discipline and eldership, which Erdrich uses as a framework for the protagonists', and arguably by extension, the child-reader's Ojibwe moral education. By presenting both Old Tallow and Two Strike as two-spirit, it is possible to observe generational difference in terms of how gender identity is worked out, but also, importantly, how the designation of elder affects one's position within the community. This can be seen most clearly after Old Tallow's death, when Two-Strike again displays belligerence. The extract below is helpful in understanding how the discussion of Two-Strike's behaviour affects the whole family:

"And you, Omakayas," Two Strike continued, "Little Frog girl, bring me a nice, hot cup of tea!" Two Strike hadn't noticed Yellow Kettle or Nokomis, who both came around the corner of the lodge at that instant. They had heard Two Strike's imperious command. "You should properly respect your relatives," Yellow Kettle said before Omakayas could move. "Your cousins are not here to serve you. Get your own tea." Two Strike faced her aunt belligerently, but her face flushed and she said nothing. She was about to turn away when Muskrat

⁶⁴ Erdrich, *The Game of Silence*, p. 124.

held out a cup of the steaming brew. "Here is your tea," Auntie Muskrat said kindly. With a look of fury, Two Strike knocked the cup from her aunt's hand, spilling it in the snow. She stalked away, calling for Animikiins. "You must not let her do that!" said Yellow Kettle to her sister. "Once again, she is beginning to think she runs the world!" "We depend on her," said Muskrat. "She has saved us from starving. She deserves good treatment." "But you are teaching her to disrespect you," said Nokomis sharply. "Now hear me." When Nokomis spoke like this, everyone paid attention. Deydey came into the camp and she gestured for him to come near. Angeline and Fishtail also appeared. "when Old Tallow saved our family by giving her life for the bear's life, she did it with a humble heart," said Nokomis. "This is the true way of a warrior. Old Tallow hunted for us all of her life, yet never once did she order me to prepare something for her. Everything I gave her, she received as a gift. Never once did she treat me with disrespect. Nor has my son, Mikwam, or my grandson, Fishtail." Nokomis gestured at the men and nodded. She swept her hands out. "Miskobines and Animikiins also know that kindness is the way of those with true strength!"⁶⁵

This extract includes three things which I think are key to understanding Two Strike's position, her relation to and significance of the role of elder and warrior. Firstly, respect for relatives is paramount. Two Strike is chastised for commanding her cousin to make her tea, effectively inserting herself in the position of a superior. Two Strike's language, referring to Omakayas as 'Little Frog girl' further diminishes Omakayas' position in the exchange. The proper expression of authority is modelled by Nokomis, who commands attention as an elder. 'Now hear me.' Secondly, skill or ability does not confer authority. The actions of a true warrior flow from humility and kindness. Just as in the earlier passage Nokomis tells Omakayas that Two Strike has her grandfather's spirit, here she uses the example of the male hunters within the family as role models for how Two Strike should behave if she is going to be a warrior. Thirdly, in the Ojibwe belief system presented, all things come from the Creator. Two Strike's arrogance, and Muskrat's permissiveness, are shown to stem from a reliance on the self and one's own abilities

⁶⁵ Erdrich, *The Porcupine Year*, p. 152-3.

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rather than a recognition that all things – including people, skills and food – come from a higher being and therefore should not be a source of pride.

Two Strike's rejection of her femininity is most apparent at the commencement of puberty. The woman's lodge, which is a rite of passage for girls, is offered to her but she refuses it, going hunting instead. By contrast, Omakayas receives hers eagerly. As I have discussed, when referring to two-spirits the distinction between sex and gender is important. This is shown in *The Porcupine Year* when Two Strike is offended by Animikiin's suggestion that she is not a girl:

"Is there something wrong with us?" Two Strike asked him outright. Animikiins flushed and looked away. "Well, you're girls [...] I mean, except you." Two Strike's eyes went wide with shock, as though she had been slapped [...] Animikiins thought of his hunting partner as another boy – perhaps he'd thought that he was paying Two Strike a compliment.⁶⁶

This shows that although Two Strike chooses to pursue 'male' activities such as hunting and make-believe war parties, she still considers herself a girl and aligns herself ultimately with her female cousins. Animikiins' misunderstanding could be read as another form of male rejection bound to a binary construct of male/female. However, it also points to a community in which there are multiple possibilities for understanding gender. Animikiins thinks that because Two Strike behaves like a boy, she must want to be a boy, but through this encounter Erdrich destabilises the concrete notions of 'boy' and 'girl' by allowing Two Strike to occupy both positions simultaneously. The expression of different views within the novels refutes the idea that Indians are a homogenous group – even within a specifically Ojibwe context, Erdrich draws out differences that shape the family and tribe into a complex social structure. Qwo-Li Driskill suggests that the inclusion of Two-Spirit people in Native communities, and I suggest, by

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 160.

extension, in tribally-specific literature, is itself an “antiassimilation stance” that reclaims tribal notions of gender and sexuality from colonial forces that “tried to eradicate Indigenous sexualities and gender systems.” Thus Erdrich’s inclusion of characters who can be read as Two-Spirit further shapes the reading of these texts as a reinscribing of Anishinaabe values within a literary, social and political landscape. The importance of tribal specificity is also noted by Driskill who claims: “American Indian literary nationalisms, for instance, can aid in developing Two-Spirit critiques that are simultaneously tribally specific and speak to intertribal concerns.”⁶⁷ Two-Strike’s and Tallow’s Two-Spirit nature is tied closely to the absence of a reliable male father figure, and more than that, to childhood trauma caused by aberrant males, differentiates the tribal context of the novel from other explanations such as divine intervention (in the case of the Shoshoni, two-spirit people act on a powerful vision⁶⁸), or the active encouragement of two-spirit status because it was considered advantageous.⁶⁹

Rather, as in her adult novels, Erdrich shows gender not to be a fixed entity but a construct of “cultural contexts and narrative frames.”⁷⁰ In these novels, upbringing and the absence of fathers specifically impacts on the behaviour of both women. As a child, Two Strike provides for her family in the absence of a male hunter, but Erdrich also connects this to an emotional coldness:

Mean and proud though she was, Two Strike never ceased to work to keep her relatives fed. Omakayas was thankful that her Deydey was not like LaPautre. Two Strike had always been a hard girl, but without her own father to love her, or the adopted one, either, she had been forced to the extreme side of her nature.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Qwo-Li Driskill, ‘Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies,’ *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16.1-2, (2010), pp. 69-92, pp. 83-4.

⁶⁸ Lang, ‘Various Kinds of Two-Spirit People’ in Jacobs, Thomas and Lang, (1997), p. 106.

⁶⁹ Carpenter, ‘Womanish Men and Manlike Women’, in Slater and Yarborough, (2010), pp. 146-164, p. 155.

⁷⁰ Rosenthal, *Narrative Deconstructions of Gender*, p. 17.

⁷¹ Erdrich, *The Porcupine Year*, p. 161.

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In this passage Omakayas' compares her own father with Two Strike's, again functioning as the normative example against which Two-Strike's variance can be measured. Two Strike's meanness is attributed to the absence of paternal love, but she also reflects those women who pursue masculine occupations through a desire (or need) to be independent. Sabine Lang describes Ojibwa women who combined masculine and feminine traits in order to gain independence, creating an "alternative *feminine* role that was culturally acceptable"⁷² (emphasis in original). Both Two-Strike and Old Tallow find themselves in situations where the traditional masculine role of hunter and provider is not fulfilled on a practical nor emotional level leading to both the development of 'masculine' skills but also emotional hardness. However, this is also indicative of the settler-colonial imposition of dualisms, that Meissner and Whyte argue stem from a "heterocolonial patriarchy" and include "man/woman, humanity/land, the civilised/uncivilised, with the former being normatively empowered."⁷³ The influence of these dualisms on the roles given to each character within the text, and indeed, in how we might *read* the text, are perhaps a limitation of our understanding of Two-Strike and Tallow. The novels as children's fiction, which is inherently conservative, as I have suggested, also perhaps frames and limits the ways in which Two-Spirit characters can be understood.

Nokomis tells Omakayas the story of Old Tallow's life, who was called 'Light Moving in the Leaves'. Sold to a voyageur named Charette after she was the lone survivor of smallpox, she was treated like a dog - ordered to carry heavy packs and sleep outside with the rest of the dogs. The name Tallow comes from eating the tallow of bones that Charette threw her. Eventually Tallow realised her own strength: "She looked at Charette when he threw a bone at

⁷² Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men*, p. 269.

⁷³ Meissner and Whyte, p. 18.

her and realised that she was free. She caught the bone in the air with one hand, stood up, and stilled him with her gaze."⁷⁴ Tallow's power is expressed in a look; her strength quite literally borne of the suffering she has endured. Choosing dogs over humans, loving them more "than her husbands,"⁷⁵ Tallow occupies a liminal space that reveals what Don Latham has described as "an alternative view of the 'wildness' associated with Native American cultures."⁷⁶ Tallow's wildness is more mastery than savagery; her upbringing contributing directly and poignantly to the survival of not only herself, but this Ojibwe family. Tallow's liminality can be read as a 'third space' then, between animal and human, and between male and female - becoming a role model not only for the possibility of occupying an in-between space *within* a culture⁷⁷, but also the way of a true warrior, one who will ultimately sacrifice herself for others: "She had known exactly how long to live."⁷⁸

Further comparison with the character of Agnes/Father Damien in *Last Report* underscores the exposure throughout Erdrich's novels of the constructedness and the fluidity of gender, and the power of trauma to shape one's identity. In *Last Report*, Agnes responds to tragedy and loss by changing her gender identity: "In transfiguring her gender, Agnes also transfigures her grief [...] as she comes to exist outside of and beyond the structures of gender and sexuality that it is implicated in."⁷⁹ For Two-Strike and Tallow, as for Agnes, occupying a gendered position that is situated 'outside of' normative gender structures enables them to come to terms with, and to an extent reinvent themselves, after the trauma caused by a loss

⁷⁴ Erdrich, *The Porcupine Year*, p. 175.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 178.

⁷⁶ Don Latham, "'Manly-Hearted Women": Gender Variants in Louise Erdrich's Birchbark House Books', *Children's Literature*, 40 (2012), 131-150, p. 138.

⁷⁷ The Third Space is defined by Homi Bhabha as an 'in-between', from which hybridised forms of cultural identity emerge. The term 'third space' is also used more broadly to refer to locations of hybridity in gender studies, education and arts.

⁷⁸ Erdrich, *The Porcupine Year*, p. 179.

⁷⁹ Iovannone, 'Transgendered Performances', p. 58.

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or abuse. It is also here that Butler's formulation of gender as a performance or construct is most keenly felt as these characters construct their gender and perform certain gendered acts for both emotional and physical survival.⁸⁰ The example of Tallow especially is linked to Julie Barak's suggestion that the two-spirit figure can be understood as a trickster, crossing between not only gendered boundaries but also "animal and human, physical and spiritual." The presence of such characters, Barak argues, enables the destabilisation of "accepted patterns of thought and action."⁸¹

Two Strike's wildness as a youth is unfocused, but in following the example of Tallow she becomes a great hunter and provider. In the following novel, *Chickadee*, Omakayas and Two Strike are adults, and Tallow has become "the old woman in [Omakayas'] stories."⁸² Two Strike is introduced as "powerful, enigmatic [and] bold"⁸³ and later we learn that Omakayas "appreciated the fierce energy of Two Strike and believed that she had inherited the magnificent spirit of Old Tallow."⁸⁴ Whereas the early novels posit Two Strike as rebellious and arrogant, in adulthood her gender variance is not only fully accepted but she has emerged as an adult whose talents, including those that would be considered masculine, are celebrated. There are direct parallels with Old Tallow: "Both [...] had no time for fools or for civilisation," they both had "gotten rid of their husbands as quickly as possible." Neither would do the work that "women usually did, but preferred to hunt" and both were soft towards children.⁸⁵ The strength of character that Old Tallow possessed, and her function within the novels, is continued seamlessly by Two Strike, who chooses to sleep outside with the horses when the

⁸⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 190.

⁸¹ Julie Barak, 'Blurs, Blends, Berdaches: Gender Mixing in the Novels of Louise Erdrich', *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Series 2, 8.3 (Fall 1996), 49-62, pp. 58-9.

⁸² Erdrich, *Chickadee*, p. 2.

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 12.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 50.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 51.

family move into a cabin in Pembina, echoing Tallow's connection to her dogs. The significance of Two Strike's attachment to the horses could be understood as a representation of the difference between living on islands, where dogs were useful for hunting, and the relatively new life on the Plains, where horses were a necessity. In this way the characters of Two Strike and Old Tallow are markers of continuity as the circumstances of the novels change. The development of Two Strike from rebellious and arrogant into someone who has inherited Old Tallow's magnificent spirit⁸⁶ has so far been explored on the basis of gender identity, but it can also be understood within the context of Ojibwe eldership, which this chapter now considers.

Within the Ojibwe language, *gichi-anishinaabe* is a term that literally translates as 'great person' - *gichi* meaning 'big' or 'great' and *anishinaabe* meaning 'person'. It is used to describe an elder, or mature person. Regardless of biological relationship, the term elder in the kinship structure of the Ojibwe referred to all older people who play a vital role in the governance of the tribe and the education of children. As we have already seen through the exploration of gender, Nokomis, as grandmother, exercises a key role in determining the way in which Two Strike's behaviour is to be handled, and is portrayed as a wise decision-maker and leader.

The relationship of the children to elders is vital to understanding the significance of elders within the family. Within the novels, the relationship between Nokomis and Omakayas is an illustration of the way in which grandparents were and are the principal teachers of children in matters of ethics and tradition.⁸⁷ A greater understanding of the role of eldership in Ojibwe family life illuminates the roles of Nokomis, Old Tallow, and later, Yellow Kettle and Omakayas, situating the narrative within a broader tradition of storytelling and the passing on of tradition. Given the huge shift in the past century towards an urbanised population of Native

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 50.

⁸⁷ McNally, *Honoring Elders*, p. 1.

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Americans with only a small percentage of U.S. households defined as multigenerational, it could be argued that the books themselves now perform at least partly the educational function of 'elder' for native children cut off from the traditional way of life.⁸⁸

One of the ways in which the elder-as-teacher is represented in the novels is through storytelling. Nokomis tells stories at intervals throughout the narrative, with certain parables reserved for specific times. As McNally has explained, "the pedagogical prerogative of the elders as a structure of authority is woven into a pattern of knowledge that is embedded in stories and inextricable from their lives, land, and community."⁸⁹ The 'pattern of knowledge' that Nokomis passes on to Omakayas is healing, a specific role that is referenced in Omakayas' childhood name, 'Little Frog'. Each clan, or 'totem' represented a specific function of Ojibwe society, the frog totem being one which under the clan system represents healing.⁹⁰ This is another way in which the series re-inscribes Native/Anishinaabe symbolism and beliefs within popular culture, where they have been misappropriated by the dominant settler culture. Another instance of this occurs in the novel when Pinch gives Omakayas a dream-catcher.

Omakayas' journey as a healer can be understood as an outworking of her relationship with Nokomis – it is the two of them, gathering birchbark, that opens the first novel, and later, after Nokomis' medicine bundle is stolen, Omakayas accompanies her as they gather more: "Omakayas spent each day of that moon in the great medicine swamp with Nokomis [...] This was how she became a healer."⁹¹ Later in the same novel, it is Nokomis that accompanies

⁸⁸ In 2010, 4% of households in the U.S. were reported as being multigenerational <<https://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/acsbr11-03.pdf>> and 71% of American Indians and Alaska Natives were defined as urban <http://www.uihi.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Broadcast_Census-Number_FINAL_v2.pdf>

⁸⁹ McNally, *Honoring Elders*, p. 142.

⁹⁰ Thomas D. Peacock and Marlene Wisuri, *Ojibwe: Waasa Inaabidaa, We Look in All Directions* (Afton, MN: Afton Historical Society Press, 2002), p. 75.

⁹¹ Erdrich, *The Porcupine Year*, p. 104.

Omakayas in her woman lodge (the tradition at the onset of puberty) in which Nokomis teaches Omakayas about her role as a woman:

She told her how her babies would be born, and how to take care of them [...] She told her how to read the sky and how to cook stews from lichen and roots. She told her how to predict bad weather, visitors, sickness. She told her how to hunt an animal in her dreams. Many of the things Nokomis talked about, they had already done together, so they also made plans. They would trade for seeds to plant a garden. They would replenish their store of medicines.⁹²

Omakayas' personal development is guided by her grandmother, whose role as teacher also becomes Omakayas' role when, after Nokomis' death, Omakayas becomes the storyteller - this time passing on knowledge and tradition to her own children.

Nokomis' practice of eldership is not identical to other female elders within the family, and contrasts with Yellow Kettle – Omakayas' mother and the grandmother of Chickadee and Makoons. Yellow Kettle displays a different temperament which affects the way Omakayas' twin boys and the other children relate to her. Yellow Kettle is not known as Nokomis because her mother is still alive, so even though she is biologically a grandmother, she is referred to as 'grandmother' or Yellow Kettle. She does not command the same respect as Nokomis – a point that is attributed to her strictness:

Sometimes they disobeyed grandmother Yellow Kettle because they were used to her scolding. But they never disobeyed their mother, not only because it was disrespectful but also because of their father. Animikiins was not to be trifled with either."⁹³

The twins actively disobey their grandmother in this case because her authority has lost its power – they are "used to her scolding". This contrasts to Nokomis, who in the earlier novel

⁹² Ibid, pp. 180-1.

⁹³ Erdrich, *Makoons*, p. 84.

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commands Two Strike to weave baskets with Omakayas even though she refuses women's work. We can also read Yellow Kettle's harshness in direct contrast to Nokomis' attitude in *Makoons*, in a telling encounter between Yellow Kettle and Quill which moves this chapter into a consideration of the dependency between children and adults.

In this example, Nokomis is clearing away after dinner, working with "great calm and cheer." By contrast, Yellow Kettle is working hard, but as she worked she "talked to herself, chewing over things that people did wrong, hissing her outrage." Working hard, in this instance, is not an end in itself – the narrative places importance on the attitude with which the work is undertaken. In particular, Yellow Kettle directs her anger at Quill, for whom she is mending another pair of trousers: "He just never grows up [...] Still acts like a crazy boy. Look how he rips his pants up." When Quill teases his mother, Omakayas implores him to grow up, to which he responds: "how can I grow up when all of my women relatives treat me like a child!" At this point in the narrative, Quill lives in an oxcart and has lost his wife Margaret, who "tried to tame him, to make him live indoors and do things properly." Quill reflects to himself that he would like a new wife, to which his mother, overhearing, scoffs at him:

Quill looked at his mother as she walked away and thought that if she could find a husband in her life, then he could surely find a wife. For is anyone was trouble, it was Yellow Kettle. He had inherited her will, her energy, but, fortunately, not her anger. He smiled indulgently. After all, her scolding was only noise, and as she passed she had tossed his pair of mended pants at his head.⁹⁴

In this passage Quill makes the same assertion as the twins, that Yellow Kettle's scolding is ineffective, 'only noise'. The mended pants are a product of her affection, and reflect her role as mother and woman – by engaging in the work of sewing, she is providing for her grown son

⁹⁴ Ibid, pp. 33-35.

– who, whilst grateful for the trousers, reflects her irritation at his juvenility by complaining that he is being treated 'like a child.'

I argue that gender is not the only thing being destabilised by Erdrich; she also places Quill, as trickster, in the margins of adult and child, wild and civilised. From his position on the boundaries, he uses humour to disrupt not just received gender assumptions (as in the encounter with Gichi Noodin, discussed earlier in the chapter), but also to question assumptions about roles within the family. Erdrich repeatedly draws on liminal figures – such as Quill, and Nanapush in the *Love Medicine* tetralogy, in order to destabilise binary delineations, including that of Native/non-Native. Indeed, given that the *Birchbark* texts themselves negotiate in part between Native text and non-Native reader, they can be understood in light of Rita Ferrari's reading of Nanapush in which she writes: "secure in his cultural identity, [Nanapush] can negotiate boundaries between the Anishinaabe culture and the white culture, all in service of the Anishinaabe."⁹⁵ Quill's antics are seen throughout the novels to dispel fear, anger and resentment. In this way, his childlike characteristics can be understood as vital to the tribe's survival ('serving the Anishinaabe') in the same way that Two-Strike and Old Tallow's hunting abilities are. When Omakayas is dismayed by the attention Two-Strike receives for killing a moose, she becomes bitter and it is Quill who offers healing through laughter: "As always, he had made her laugh. And he had taken the poison from her heart."⁹⁶ Here, the 'poison' that threatened the relationship between Omakayas and Two-Strike, and more broadly her attitude towards the achievements of others, is removed by Quill's use of humour.

⁹⁵ Ferrari, "Where the maps stopped," p. 152.

⁹⁶ Erdrich, *Porcupine Year*, p. 150.

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Quill's skill as a trader and oxcart driver is a relatively new vocation which indicates a shift from traditional male hunting roles and yet is imbued, by Quill, with an Anishinaabe worldview when he teaches Chickadee about the ways of the trail:

"If something on the trail goes wrong, a tree falls across, a pole breaks, then we fix it. We depend on those who went before us to do the same. Once, I explained this to Nokomis. Know what she said?" "What?" "She said that was how the world should work. We should fix what we break in this world for the ones who come next, our children."⁹⁷

As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the Anishinaabe worldview is shaped by the collective, not the individual. Quill's description of how the trail works is in one sense, a practical obligation that benefits all trail users – in itself, it is not a specifically Anishinaabe view. Elizabeth Gargano has suggested that Erdrich's narratives "offer subtle linkages between event and narrative that evoke a complex Ojibwa worldview"⁹⁸ and I suggest that the practices of the oxcart trail are one such instance. The addition of Nokomis' input develops Quill's understanding of the event on the trail into a metaphor for the rest of the world, connecting this practice to a broader Anishinaabe way of thinking about the world as a collective, and reinforcing Nokomis' role as teacher and elder.

When Quill is living with Margaret, his adoption of homemaking practices turns him from a "wild boy" into "not a completely sensible young man." However, as in the encounter above, we see Quill has been left by Margaret because he could not maintain that lifestyle and returned to his "old, wild ways."⁹⁹ His 'wildness', and to an extent, trickster behaviour, then, directly relates to his (in)ability to participate in a western nuclear family structure – and to

⁹⁷ Erdrich, *Chickadee*, p. 180.

⁹⁸ Elizabeth Gargano, 'Oral Narrative and Ojibwa Story Cycles in Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence*', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 31.1 (2006), 27-39, p. 37.

⁹⁹ Erdrich, *Chickadee*, p. 98.

enact the ideal of domestication which was key to the assimilationists' attempts to break down the tribe and reorganise families into discrete 'civilised' homesteads that conformed to Euro-American ideas.¹⁰⁰

Another way in which Erdrich disrupts the western nuclear family unit in order to engender an Anishinaabe understanding of family in which the extended family or clan is the primary unit,¹⁰¹ is the encounter that Chickadee has with nuns while he is making his way home after escaping from his kidnappers. Coming across a party of travelling Catholics, Chickadee interprets the religious orders of 'Father' 'Mother' and 'Sisters' to be a family. On overhearing the nuns, they are described as "chattering like squirrels"¹⁰² which interprets the noise of these unfamiliar people in familiar terms that show how Chickadee reads the world by focusing on elements of the natural. The few words of English that Chickadee understands cause him to believe that the nuns are the priest's sisters, the Mother their mother. "This was a family – an odd family who dressed much differently than most, but probably harmless." When Chickadee is taken into the nun's carriage, it is the dog, with its "cheerful smile" that reassures Chickadee: "[The dog] seemed to grin as Chickadee settled in beside him. How could a boy resist what seemed to be a happy family?"¹⁰³ The assurance that Chickadee takes from the welcoming dog further reinforces the idea that Chickadee is guided by his understanding of the natural world.

At this point, Chickadee has been away from home for a long time, fending for himself, which the nuns interpret as neglect. The Mother calls him a 'filthy savage' with the "dirt of the ancients on him, caked in."¹⁰⁴ Erdrich is careful to explain that Chickadee's dirt was a result of

¹⁰⁰ Cahill, *Federal Fathers and Mothers*, p. 39.

¹⁰¹ Slaughter, 'Contested Identities', p. 228.

¹⁰² Erdrich, *Chickadee*, p. 83.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, p. 87.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 87, 93.

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living with his captors, and that “Omakayas kept her boys very clean [...] they bathed in cold water every single day.”¹⁰⁵ The nuns try and exchange his carefully made clothes for cast-offs and scrub him with soap. Although the nuns symbolise the civilising mission of the Catholic church in the nineteenth century, Erdrich shows their offering to be hollow by exposing the racism in the nun’s attitude and by showing how their practices and provisions – aligned with ‘progress’ - compare negatively to the Anishinaabe way of living.

The younger nun is more sympathetic, describing him as a ‘blessing’ and a “nice looking boy.”¹⁰⁶ The two attitudes on display here can be read as representative of the attitudes towards Indian children during the assimilation period (c.1870-1930), both of which resulted in the removal of children from their Indian families. The Mother in this passage represents the racist view of the Indian child as a savage in need of civilising. Settlers were reluctant to adopt Indian children, instead placing them in boarding schools that acted in loco parentis, as Diana Pazicky has explained, the schools “played the role of strict surrogate parents.”¹⁰⁷ Further justification for this approach can be understood by applying Carol Singley’s reading of the orphan in texts about adoption to the situation of the Indian child. Singley’s argument builds on Pazicky’s suggestion that the orphan can be read as scapegoat, “a representation of the undesirable aspects of the nation itself”, a result of which the adoption (or in the case of Indian boarding schools, the civilising mission) is celebrated as “not only child-saving but also nation-building.”¹⁰⁸ The idea of child-saving at work here points to the other side of the same coin, represented by the younger Sister’s attitude towards Chickadee. The development of an

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, pp. 94-5.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, pp. 86-7.

¹⁰⁷ Diana Loercher Pazicky, *Cultural Orphans in America*, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), p. 42.

¹⁰⁸ Carol J. Singley, ‘Teaching American Literature: The Centrality of Adoption’, *Modern Language Studies*, 34.1-2 (Spring-Autumn, 2004), 76-83, p. 81.

ideology of domesticity, as Beth Piatote has argued, framed Indian child removal in “terms of paternalistic benevolence,” this time casting Indian mothers as unfit and the children in need of rescue.¹⁰⁹ The young nun, then, views Chickadee as lost to his own family and culture, and ‘saved’ by the church’s intervention.

More widely, this attitude of ‘benevolence’ is exposed by Erdrich to be a mockery of true/Anishinaabe understandings of family as she brings the discourse of settlement and white encroachment into discussions of what constitutes family and Indian identity. To be clear, it is not that Euro-American configurations of the family in a nuclear unit can’t be considered ‘true’ families, but I believe the point Erdrich is making is to call out the hypocrisy of framing colonial expansion in terms of familial relationships, positing the Indian as child. This chapter closes with an examination of the novels’ response to colonial paternalism, before returning to the experience of Chickadee to show how the Anishinaabe worldview defines family and kinship in connection with the natural world.

The term ‘Great Father’, used by Indians to refer to the President as representative of the United States government, was interpreted in two ways. To the Indians, kinship terms such as ‘father’ referred to the social conventions, authority and responsibilities of the role. It could be argued that as a term connoting responsibility, it held the government to account for the promises of support that were made to Indians being displaced. The government’s use of the term, on the other hand, somewhat infantilised Indians, as L. G. Moses has suggested, it anticipated “ideas about Indians as dependent – and, one suspects, dutiful – children.”¹¹⁰ The issue here is not so much about differing ideas of the role of father and children, but rather, it is about the *failure* of the U.S. government to uphold the duties in relation to their role. In *The*

¹⁰⁹ Piatote, *Domestic Subjects*, p. 3.

¹¹⁰ L. G. Moses, 'The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians', *The Annals of Iowa*, 49 (1987), 142-145, p. 143.

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Porcupine Year, we see Deydey, Omakayas' father, make plain the hypocrisy at the root of the relationship:

(Deydey) did not trust the one they called "great father" off in Washington. "He is not my great father", Deydey would say. "I have seen him starve our people. I have seen him take our land. No father kills his children and leaves them homeless!" ¹¹¹

In Deydey's complaint the government have abjectly failed to act as a 'father' towards the Indian population, by taking land, forcing them into other territories and breaking their promises. Earlier in the chapter, the effect of poor fathers on Tallow and Two Strike was examined in relation to their emotional development and gender identity. Here, again, Erdrich draws out the effect of poor fathers, this time on a much larger scale as she shows the President's role as great father to be one that exploits and kills rather than one who nurtures.

Whilst the American government pursued so-called paternalist policies towards Indians, various women's movements began what became known as maternalism with the formation of the Women's National Indian Association (WNIA) in the late eighteenth century. As a means for women to have some influence on public policy, the WNIA began campaigning for indigenous and women's rights on behalf of oppressed women. However, this swiftly manifested as a way to help the government solve the 'Indian problem', as Margaret Jacobs explains:

The WNIA readily invoked family metaphors, calling themselves mothers and sisters to Indian women, to establish a sense that they knew what was best for these women, even though few of them had spent any time in the presence of actual Indian women or solicited their concerns.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Erdrich, *The Porcupine Year*, p. 45.

¹¹² Margaret D. Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), p. 95.

By positing themselves, like the nuns in *Chickadee*, as 'saviours' of indigenous women and children, the women of the WNIA sought to help indigenous women and children whilst at the same time supporting the government's 'civilising mission' of assimilation and adoption.

To return to *Chickadee*, his experience of the family of nuns ends abruptly when he runs away, naked. The nuns have removed his clothes in order to wash him, and as they approach him with scissors he leaps out of the bathtub and grabs his bundle of clothes. The nuns literally 'strip' him of his Indianness, and when he runs away he uses his understanding of the natural world to find the right path, following the "way the trees pointed." At his lowest ebb, he is rescued by his namesake, the chickadee. "He'd been adopted. He had a father, the chickadee, and two mothers who were hawks."¹¹³ The hawks help him by dropping food, providing for him as he travels. Elsewhere in the novels Omakayas refers to bears as 'brothers', the earth as 'mother', and the twins describe a turtle as 'grandfather'. This demonstrates to the readers of the novels that the Anishinaabe definition of kinship encompasses other living creatures and the earth itself, offering a relational understanding of the natural environment that can be held to even as the way of life begins to shift, as the earlier example of Quill on the trail shows.

The ways in which *The Birchbark House* series offers the reader an Anishinaabe understanding of family, gender and kinship begins with the extensive family tree of the novel. As a starting point for understanding the broader Anishinaabe kinship network, the family relationships portrayed in the novels enable the reader to explore the workings of an extended family and tribal structure. In this chapter I argue that a close reading of theories of gender and performativity show how Erdrich addresses both the conformity and variance of gender roles

¹¹³ Erdrich, *Chickadee*, p. 118.

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within the narrative, creating space for the expression of multiple gender identities and reinforcing the message that the tribe's focus is the communal, not individual, identity. Self-centredness is usually punished, and actions that are carried out for the good of the whole are celebrated and affirmed. The prioritisation of Anishinaabe values is also demonstrated through a reading of the function of eldership, and through close analysis of the texts this chapter has explored the role of elders in training and guiding the younger generation through the cultural practices of apprenticeship and storytelling. The references made to animals in familial terms such as bear brothers and hawk mothers, develops the pattern seen in chapter two of the environment as a cycle of dependency. This is contrasted in the novels with federal and missionary uses of familial terms in the treatment of Indians during the period of early nation-building and assimilation, which characterised Indians as both dependent children and uncivilised, or 'wild'. It is these depictions which arguably form the basis for many stereotypical depictions of Indian tribes, and Erdrich's narrative therefore functions partly as a counterpoint to assumptions about the ways in which Indian families lived and worked at the midpoint of the nineteenth century. More than that, though, the novels portray a diverse and productive family structure in which children are nurtured and safe as the basis for the development of Anishinaabe culture and consequently, its survival.

Storytelling

The oral tradition in the practice of storytelling forms an intersection between Children's Literature and Native American literature. Fairy-tales, and the folk tradition from which they are derived are implicated by Jack Zipes as transmitting cultural values as part of the acculturation of children.¹ The power of stories to shape our understanding of the world has been discussed in chapter one, and furthermore, their cumulative power as intertextual memories has lead Catherine Rainwater to liken stories to medicine bundles – “a text is likewise a ‘container’ of powerful signs pertinent to individual and group history and identity, and passed along through generations.”² Whilst the tradition of children's literature shares a pedagogical function with Native American stories and teachings, it is important to distinguish between stories designed to conform children to a particular view of the world and behaviour pattern, and the pedagogy of Native American stories which applies to children and adults, and underpins a Native understanding of identity and history. As this chapter will show, stories are, in the words of Thomas King, “all we are”, and as such are the “primary means for us to engage with and make sense of the world around us.”³ *The Birchbark House* series puts storytelling at the heart of Anishinaabe culture by interweaving storytelling practices throughout the narrative.

¹ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilisation* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 9, cited in Kimberley Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 2.

² Catherine Rainwater, *Dreams of Fiery Stars: The Transformations of Native American Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 136.

³ Sophie McCall, Deanna Reder et al., eds., *Read, Listen, Tell: Indigenous Stories from Turtle Island* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2017), p. 13.

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This chapter explores the various functions that these stories perform within the narrative as a whole and how they relate to aspects of the Anishinaabe worldview with which this thesis is concerned. To clarify the distinction between the main plot of the novels and the embedded stories, the novels can be understood as containing two types of story. The first is the main body of text, which is the narrative of Omakayas and her family. The second features the interwoven oral stories which is positioned within the text as a series of stories told by an adult to a child, at various points to explain, contextualise and illuminate the events of the primary narrative, but which themselves do not form any overarching narrative or sequence. This secondary narrative offers the reader a multi-layered approach to the Anishinaabe worldview by enabling them to engage with both traditional Anishinaabe tales and at the same time experience them as they impact on the narrative of Omakayas' life.

Scholars such as Elizabeth Gargano and Clare Bradford have observed the ways in which Native American storytelling practices are embedded in literature for children and young adults. Gargano describes the insertion of traditional stories into Erdrich's narrative as an interruption that "emphasise(s) cultural continuity while [...] contextualis(ing) present action."⁴ The stories that are told reflect on, influence, and provide backstory to the plot of the novel, whilst providing a grounding in Anishinaabe traditional knowledge. Gargano goes on to describe these inserted stories and the characters' reactions to them as a model for how "readers, both children and adults, can read and interact with Omakayas's story."⁵ This idea places the narrative in relation to the readers just as the 'inserted stories' are in relation to the characters, so that even the act of reading is guided by the Anishinaabe way of telling and

⁴ Elizabeth Gargano, 'Oral Narrative and Ojibwa Story Cycles in Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence*', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 31.1, (2006), 27-39, p. 28.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 38.

listening to stories. Bradford, writing about Cynthia Leitich Smith's novel *Jingle Dancer* (2000), comments that the insertion of a Muscogee Creek story into the wider narrative "allud(es) to Native American traditions whereby cultural values are transmitted indirectly and through narrative."⁶ Following Gargano's idea of the stories as a model for reading and understanding, the indirect transmission of values to which Bradford refers can be seen throughout the series as the protagonists gain cultural knowledge through stories, in turn signifying the cultural knowledge that there is to be gained by readers.

At this point it should be noted that the range of 'cultural knowledge' available to readers is contentious and refers back to Treuer's concerns about mistaking fiction for culture. The broadening of worldviews, and the challenging of assumptions and stereotypes in the minds of non-Native readers is a vital and necessary part of accurate representation within these texts. At the same time, the limitations of such cultural knowledge rest within what can be termed the sacred mode – the stories, lifeways and beliefs that are unique to Anishinaabe culture and though perhaps recognisable and affirming to Native readers, inappropriate to share widely and in ways that may be misconstrued by non-Native readers. The point made earlier about British author J.K. Rowling's use of Native spiritual practices and the recent issues surrounding the publication of *Trail of Lightning* (2018) by the acclaimed Diné author Rebecca Roanhorse further illustrates this dilemma.⁷ Later in the chapter, I discuss how Erdrich's use of a mix of stories helps to mitigate some of the dangers in conveying cultural knowledge through story.

⁶ Clare Bradford, *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Readings of Children's Literature* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), p. 45.

⁷ For more on this debate and the concerns about *Trail of Lightning*, read Debbie Reese, 'Concerns about Roanhorse's *Trail of Lightning*', *American Indians in Children's Literature* 9.08.18 Available at <<https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/2018/08/concerns-about-roanhorses-trail-of.html>>

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Within Erdrich's writing it is possible to see how the traditional stories that 'disrupt' the narrative are demonstrations of that transmission of cultural knowledge for Omakayas, the other characters, and the readers of the novels. However, it could be argued that the stories can also be considered an act of presencing, positioning the stories that were, and may still be, passed on orally, within a text that has a broader reach to keep the stories alive for both indigenous and non-indigenous children. Ute Lischke argues for such a reading when she says "As cultures live through word of mouth, the art of storytelling, rooted in experience itself, becomes a significant contributor to maintaining cultures."⁸ The storytelling, though written, contributes to the word-of-mouth continuity of culture by positioning the reader along with Omakayas as she listens to the stories told to her by elders. Margaret Noodin explains the way that the novels replicate the patterns of oral storytelling; "planting stories within stories," she says, "remind(s) listeners of the many ways one story, image or idea can connect to others."⁹ Erdrich places stories, particularly *adisookan*, or teaching stories, within the narrative that not only contextualise or illuminate the events of the story but can drive the story forward, such as the story 'Nanabozho and Muskrat Make an Earth', which I will discuss in more detail later in the chapter. In this sense, the *adisookan* are stories that have an immediate application within the wider text, in the life of the characters and perhaps the reader.

This chapter will argue that *within* the narrative the stories occupy multiple positions that contribute to the overall survivance of Anishinaabe culture by teaching *mino-bimaadiziwin* and blending traditional oral storytelling practices with imagined and lived experience.

⁸ Ute Lischke, 'A World of Beauty: The Spirits within Nature in the Writings of Louise Erdrich' in *The Nature of Empires and the Empires of Nature: Indigenous Peoples and the Great Lakes Environment* ed. by Karl S. Hele (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), pp. 239-258, (p. 247).

⁹ Margaret Noodin, *Bawaajimo: A Dialect of Dreams in Anishinaabe Language and Literature*, (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2014), p. 74.

Gargano describes the novels as “cultural texts,”¹⁰ explaining that “Erdrich’s novels fuse form and content to a new end, calling readers to understand her child protagonist’s adventures through an active engagement with Ojibwa values and traditions.”¹¹ The stories contained within the novels help to shape and develop the understanding of Anishinaabe cultural values that is offered by the texts, not only insofar as they relate to the events of the narrative, but also more broadly as they embody the same values and knowledge that underpin Anishinaabe society today.

There are two types of traditional story contained within the narrative. There are *adisookan*, or ‘teaching’ stories, which are sacred and only for certain times. The other kind of story, *dibaajimowinan*, can be understood as entertainment, or news – including personal experiences and tales of travels and encounters. This is explained to the reader in *The Birchbark House*, when Omakayas desperately wants to ask for a story but knows her grandmother will refuse:

Deydey, with his half-white blood, could often be persuaded because the stories he told were different from Nokomis’s. Hers were *adisookan* stories, meant only for winter. Deydey usually talked about his travels, the places he’d seen and the people, the close calls and momentous encounters with animals, weather, other Anishinabeg and, best of all, ghosts.¹²

The distinction in this passage between Nokomis’ and Deydey’s stories refers to Deydey’s ‘half-white blood’, which leaves open the suggestion that his ancestry, as mixed, affects the kind of stories that he tells. He does not deliver the traditional *adisookan* but instead tells the kind of stories that reflect on Anishinaabe encounters with the world around them, the ‘lived experience’ of the principles contained in the sacred teachings. This chapter will show the

¹⁰ Gargano, 'Oral Narrative and Ojibwa Story Cycles', p. 27.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 28-9.

¹² Louise Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, (New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1999, repr. 2002), p. 61.

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various ways in which the two kinds of story 'operate' within the narrative and how they contribute to the continuance of Anishinaabe knowledge and values.

Stories as Empowerment

The first *adisookan* found within the narrative is the story 'Nanabozho and Muskrat Make an Earth.' It is told by Nokomis during the winter; Omakayas requests it because the ice is thawing and she knows "there will be no more stories until next winter."¹³ The story is introduced as a creation tale, "the story of how the earth began,"¹⁴ though the story begins with rain and rising water and in other re-tellings is known as 'The Great Flood.' Nanabozho is known as a spirit, a trickster and a teacher, who is described by Edward Benton-Banai as the spirit of the Anishinaabe, or original man.¹⁵ It is clear that Omakayas knows this story already – she asks for it by name, as a source of comfort: "Maybe because she so often felt small and helpless, Omakayas thought long about one particular tale Nokomis told."¹⁶ The story describes a great flood that covers the earth, which Nanabozho survives by climbing a tree and then asking the tree to stretch to twice its height. When the rains stop, Nanabozho sees three animals playing in the water; the beaver, muskrat and otter. Nanabozho asks the animals to dive into the water and look for some earth that Nanabozho could use to make an island. The otter and beaver try, but drown without finding any grains of earth, and Nanabozho breathes on them to bring them back to life. Nobody thinks much of the small muskrat, but eventually Nanabozho asks him to try and find some dirt. The muskrat drowns, but when he floats to the

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 171.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 171.

¹⁵ Edward Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway* (St Paul, MN: Indian Country Press, 1988; repr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 31.

¹⁶ Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, p. 171.

surface he has five grains of earth – one in each of his paws and one in his mouth. Nanabozho brings him back to life, then threw the dirt onto the water to make an island which grew each time he threw a handful of dirt. The story ends with all the animals that were in the water climbing onto the island, which Nokomis explains is “this earth we are on today.”¹⁷

The story is brought into the present by ending the story with the knowledge that the new earth, or island, created by Nanabozho and the muskrat is the same earth on which Omakayas and her family now live. The actions of the characters have an impact on Omakayas' life in the present, and Nokomis makes clear the main teaching focus of the story:

Omakayas knew that her Nokomis told her this story for a larger reason than just because she asked for it. She thought many times of the muskrat diving down, down, down for that little bit of dirt that made the world [...] “If such a small animal could do so much,” Nokomis always said, after she'd finished the story, “your efforts are important, too.”¹⁸

This story, and its effect on Omakayas, can be understood in the context of the events of the primary narrative. The winter is coming to an end, and the family are recovering from the events of the smallpox epidemic which killed Omakayas' baby brother, scarred her sister, and has left her father weak. Unable to hunt, Deydey uses his skills at chess to outwit the trader and win supplies. Omakayas is grieving and suffering from depression, and the whole family are hungry – the chapter in which the *adisookan* sits is titled ‘Hunger.’ The overlooked muskrat who is thought too small and weak to be useful, yet finds the dirt that becomes the new earth, empowers Omakayas to make her contribution to the family's survival. This story also reinforces the Anishinaabe principle that every individual has something worth contributing. Omakayas takes courage from the story, resolving to go and find food:

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 175.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 175.

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Tomorrow, resolved Omakayas now that she had a bit of strength, she would make her small, important effort like the muskrat. She would go out with Andeg and find more squirrel caches in the woods.¹⁹

Omakayas identifies with the muskrat, and uses the muskrat's actions to guide her own. Daniel Heath Justice describes empowerment as

about more than giving strength to individuals; it is about working toward the dignity and healing of communities and the renewal of kinship ties and responsibilities.²⁰

The inclusion of stories throughout the narrative that empower the child protagonists to act upon visions and act upon the teachings of their elders is a significant contribution to the 'dignity and healing of communities,' a theme that is repeated throughout the narrative as the extended family at its focus endures trials without losing hope.

The feeling of helplessness that Omakayas experiences, as well as relating directly to the hardship the family faced, can arguably be considered symptomatic of childhood and throughout the novels there is an emphasis on the youngest or weakest being guided by the spirits to achieve great things. This is seen in *Chickadee*, where the song of the chickadee sustains the human Chickadee throughout his kidnapping and escape. It is also the theme of another embedded story that Nokomis tells during the winter of *The Game of Silence*.

This story is not sacred, but is a *windigo* story, about the evil spirit described as "that terrible monster of the ice and snow."²¹ Titled 'The Little Girl and the Wiindigoo', it tells the story of a windigo spirit that is approaching the cabin, freezing everything in its path. An elder decides that whoever can light the pipe without fire will be the one strong enough to fight the

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 177.

²⁰ Daniel Heath Justice, 'Introduction: Conjuring Marks: Furthering Indigenous Empowerment through Literature,' *American Indian Quarterly*, 28.1&2, (2004), pp. 3-11, p. 10.

²¹ Louise Erdrich, *The Game of Silence*, (New York: Harper Trophy, 2006), p. 159.

windigo. Everybody tries, "even the babies," but nobody is able to light it. Then the elder calls on the girl wearing raggedy clothes, sitting at the edge of the fire, too poor to own a blanket. She is invisible to many of the people in the cabin: "At first they were so used to overlooking the girl that they saw no one."²² She tries three times to light the pipe with no success and then "the spirit who was looking after her spoke so that only she could hear. Think of your mother, said the spirit, and the girl thought of her mother. She touched the pipe and it caught on fire."²³ The girl kills the windigo, who turns back into a man and though he is "never told he had been a wiindigoo [...] he was told that he must hunt for the little girl."²⁴ Unlike the earlier story, there is no immediate application for Omakayas or the other child protagonists, and the story is not dwelled upon within the broader narrative. In that sense, it is an entertainment story, but nonetheless it can be read as an empowering story through its invocation to be kind to the helpless and respect the spirits who may use the weakest to provide help.

One other consideration from this story is that the windigo is found to be a man, and that man is not punished nor told about his experience as windigo. This shows that an individual possessed by a windigo is accepted back into the family or tribe, and not cast out (although he was "watched very carefully").²⁵ Windigo figures also appear in Erdrich's adult novel *Tracks*, in the characters of Fleur, Nanapush and Pauline - though as Bonnie Winsbro argues, the term windigo is used by Nanapush to suggest a 'psychic disorder' rather than spiritual possession. That said, Winsbro shows how the circumstances under which Nanapush and Fleur go 'half windigo' are clearly linked to the spirit, Windigo, and I would go further to connect the Windigo of *Tracks* to the 'ice monster' of *The Game of Silence*, and significantly, to

²² Ibid, p. 162.

²³ Ibid, p. 163.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 164.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 164.

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grief.²⁶ Janet Fiskio suggests that the windigo spirit in *Tracks*, such as it relates to famine, is brought by colonisation²⁷ and this is echoed in *The Birchbark House* when the smallpox brought by a voyageur precipitates Omakayas' depression. In *Tracks*, at the point of going windigo, Nanapush and Fleur are the last surviving members of their families. The names of the dead weigh them down as 'slivers of ice', evoking both the literal frost of winter and the weight of grief.

Days passed, weeks, and we didn't leave the cabin for fear we'd crack our cold and fragile bodies. We had gone half windigo. I learned later that this was common, that there were many of our people who died in this manner, of the invisible sickness.²⁸

The grief that almost kills Fleur and Nanapush also contextualises the Muskrat story for it is in the depths of winter that Omakayas and her family are struggling to survive without food, and with the grief of their losses weighing on Omakayas' heart. The story of the Windigo acknowledges the potential for any human to become *windigo*, but puts the power of overcoming that into the hands of a child who is attuned to the spirits.

These two examples show how the stories told by Nokomis empower Omakayas, and the reader, to learn and act upon the teachings. Stories also empower contemporary Anishinaabe culture, as Lawrence Gross argues: "If we [...] acknowledge that knowledge is power, the mutual exchange of stories becomes a way for family and friends in a storytelling tradition to mutually enrich each other, and also enrich the stories, and thereby, the knowledge base of the society."²⁹ By including traditional stories within the narrative, Erdrich

²⁶ Bonnie C. Winsbro, *Supernatural Forces: Belief, Difference, and Power in Contemporary Works by Ethnic Women* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), pp. 71-72.

²⁷ Janet Fiskio, 'Where Food Grows on Water: Food Sovereignty and Indigenous North American Literatures', in *The Routledge Companion to Native American Literature*, ed. by Deborah L. Madsen (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 241.

²⁸ Louise Erdrich, *Tracks*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1988, repr. London: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 6.

²⁹ Lawrence W. Gross, *Anishinaabe Ways of Knowing and Being* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 162.

makes them available to future generations of Native children as well as sharing them with children from other cultures, enriching each other. The mutability of stories is apparent when one compares variations of the flood story, such as Benton-Banai's retelling with Erdrich's. The essence of the story is the same, but small details are different – for example in Benton-Banai's version Nanabozho is written 'Waynaboozhoo' and he sits on a log, whereas in Erdrich's telling Nanabozho climbs a tree³⁰. This adds to the richness of the knowledge base in which no single telling of a story is the same as the one before.

Stories as Place/Time

The relationship between stories and place is evident throughout the narrative, reflected in both the setting and telling of the stories, and in the form of the novels. By interrogating how the stories connect to the land and time of year it is possible to see the effects of dispossession and tribal movement in later novels on the frequency and type of story. Time is represented as cyclical, not linear, in a way that reflects the seasons and the characters' observance and dependence upon the seasonal round of hunting. The first two novels of the series are structured around the seasonal round, and the chapters are separated into sections accordingly. The winter is the time for stories, as Erdrich explains in *The Game of Silence*:

The long winter nights were for storytelling, and Nokomis was known as an excellent storyteller [...] She told the holy stories and the funny stories, the aadizookaanag that explained how the world came into being, how it continued to be made. These stories explained how people came about, and how humans learned so much from the wise and hilarious teacher, Nanabozho.³¹

³⁰ Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book*, pp. 29-34.

³¹ Erdrich, *The Game of Silence*, pp. 158-9.

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The description of the world as a living entity, being made and remade, points to the Anishinaabe teaching that humans are to live in harmony with creation, one of the first lessons of the 'original man' in Edward Benton-Banai's collection of stories.³² The earth being made and remade also reflects the nature of storytelling as stories are added to, changed, and retold by different people in different times. Lawrence Gross contends that the control over Anishinaabe myths "stresses values over meaning [...] a plurality of readings can be acceptable, as long as they are in concert with the accepted value system." By the same token, new tellings and interpretations of traditional stories strengthen cultural knowledge, as we have seen between Erdrich and Benton-Banai, as long as the correct values are represented.³³

The significance of stories that connect tribes to specific locations has been tested and proven in Canadian law. In the case of *Delgamuukw v British Columbia*, the tribe initially lost a claim to their land against the Supreme Court of British Columbia. On appeal at the Supreme Court of Canada, however, their claim was upheld partly on the basis of oral testimony, granting title to the land in question and rights to extract resources. Joy Hendry has described how oral history in this case was "recognised as acceptable evidence [...] handing down stories that illustrate the link between a people and their land was a most effective way of ensuring their continuity."³⁴ The case set precedent for later rulings, including a 2014 case brought by the Tishqot'in "which further established the existence of Indigenous title to non-treatied land in British Columbia."³⁵ Stories that connect people to land therefore have power not only to

³² Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book*, p. 14.

³³ Lawrence W. Gross, 'Cultural Sovereignty and Native American Hermeneutics in the Interpretation of the Sacred Stories of the Anishinaabe', *Wicazo Sa Review*, 18.2 (2003), 127-134, p. 128.

³⁴ Joy Hendry, *Reclaiming Culture: Indigenous People and Self-Representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 159.

³⁵ Andrew Kurjata, '20 years ago, this court case changed the way Canadians understood Indigenous rights', *CBC News*, 11 Dec 2017, < <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/delgamuukw-vs-british-columbia-20-years-rights-titles-1.4440703>>

enrich the knowledge of a tribe, as Gross has said, but can play a vital role in land claims and in the continuity of distinct cultures.

The importance of the temporal location of the embedded storytelling takes on added significance when one considers that the novels are not subject to any constraints over when they can be read, and by whom. Erdrich's placement of the important stories in the winter months of the novels is key to imparting to the reader the significance of this time of year. As Margaret Noodin writes: "Although her books can be read any time of year, she places the reader with her characters in the midst of winter to hear the oldest and most important stories of the Anishinaabe community."³⁶ For the *adisookan*, therefore, the time and setting is important to the telling of the story, which reinforces the understanding of the story as sacred and spiritually significant. Time and place, then, are inextricably linked to the stories that are vital to the continuance of culture, and the effects of the loss of traditional homelands can be seen in the loss of stories in the later novels, *Chickadee* and *Makoons*.

These two novels represent Omakayas's sons, the next generation of Anishinaabe. The lack of inserted story in *Chickadee*, and the single story told by Omakayas in *Makoons* could be thought of as representative of the risks of losing traditional stories (and by extension, culture) when tribes are displaced and no longer live together. In *Makoons*, as the family miss their grandmother Nokomis and the stories she told, Omakayas begins a story unexpectedly and without introduction: "And then suddenly Omakayas said those words. Mewinzha, mewinzha."³⁷ The story, about a man who falls in love with a woman who has been protecting him by shape-shifting from bear to human, is discussed more in chapter two, but here I suggest it hints at revitalisation – looking backwards to earlier stories of Omakayas' own spirit

³⁶ Noodin, *Bawaajimo*, p. 75.

³⁷ Louise Erdrich, *Makoons*, (New York: Harper, 2016), p. 133.

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protector, whilst placing the onus on each generation to continue telling the story. On a broader scale, the novels themselves encapsulate this effort to revitalise the storytelling tradition by Erdrich herself of which the inclusion of timely traditional stories in the narrative is a part. This section will consider *Chickadee* and *Makoons* insofar as the form and content reflect the loss and revitalisation of tradition. The loss of voice and power is a common trope in Native American fiction more broadly, and this can be understood through *Chickadee* as he regains his own strength by listening to his namesake and spirit protector.

The narrative of *Chickadee* focuses on the search for and return of one of Omakayas' twins when he is captured by two French voyageurs who want to enslave him. Stolen from underneath walls of birchbark, *Chickadee's* ordeal can be read as a plot device to signify the changes wrought upon the family's way of life by their movement further west, such as the shift to a more permanent, static home and the introduction of horses for travelling across the Plains. Compared to the first three novels of the series, in which a total of eight stories are embedded, the loss of story in *Chickadee* can be connected directly to the loss of land. Stephanie Fitzgerald writes: "Stories are not only *tied* to certain land formations and places, but they form a *part* of the land."³⁸ The preoccupation with movement in the narrative represents a search for a new homeland and in the process, new stories. The traditional stories of the earlier novels can't be told because the people are far from the land in which the stories are embedded; instead, *Chickadee* begins with the eight-year-old twins goading their mother, Omakayas, into recounting the story of their birth again and again. Storytelling practices, as well as other aspects of cultural identity, are affected by the loss of sacred homeland. Emerging from the journey of the lost *Chickadee* is a song, and protection of the chickadee and hawks,

³⁸ Stephanie J. Fitzgerald, *Native Women and Land: Narratives of Dispossession and Resurgence* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2015), p. 37.

both of which can be illuminated through knowledge of the story of the Memegwesi, told by Nokomis in *The Game of Silence*. Chickadee's journey and the presence of animal helpers reflects the continuity of Anishinaabe spiritual beliefs and interrelatedness with the natural world, despite displacement.

The song that Chickadee is given comes from his namesake, after he calls out for help when he is weary and alone:

He wondered whom he was asking to help him – Gizhe Manidoo, the great, kind spirit? Other helpful spirits, the adizookaanag? Perhaps the memegwesiwag, the little people, spirits of the forest. Or his we'eh, his namesake, perhaps? Who would answer if he spoke aloud? "Help me, please help me, or I will die here," he said to the air, the trees, and anything else that could hear him. Immediately, on a thin branch right over his face, a chickadee perched. This bird spoke to him, not in the voice of a bird, but in a voice he could understand.³⁹

Chickadee is familiar with a variety of spiritual helpers that form part of the Anishinaabe spiritual world, and by listing them here the reader is also made aware of them. For those familiar with the series, this emphasises the sense of crisis, as the reader learns that spiritual helpers appear in times of great difficulty. Indeed, earlier in this novel Omakayas is made aware of Chickadee's abduction by her protector, the bear, in a dream. The appearance of the spiritual helpers connects the storytelling – both the embedded stories and the texts' narrative – with the wider cultural and spiritual practices of the Ojibwe.

Nokomis' story of the memegwesi is told to Omakayas as a message that it is time for her to seek out her own helper.⁴⁰ Nokomis' story describes a terrible winter, during which people around her froze to death and the family nearly starved. They were close to "stewing up [their] own makazinan" when Nokomis' helper, the 'little man', appeared and led her to a

³⁹ Louise Erdrich, *Chickadee*, (New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 2012), pp. 113-4.

⁴⁰ Erdrich, *The Game of Silence*, p. 110.

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sleeping bear before vanishing. The bear was an easy kill and kept the family alive for the rest of winter.⁴¹ Similarly, then, the chickadee guides Chickadee to a source of food, and commands hawks to continue to provide for Chickadee by dropping food for him on his journey. It also teaches him a song:

*I am only the Chickadee
Yet small things have great power
I speak the truth*

Chickadee's song becomes his strength, and later, it helps to heal Makoons.⁴² The power attributed to the song is similar to that of the story; it is able to heal, comfort, and teach. The song becomes *part of* Chickadee: "He could feel the words flow through him and his legs moved with purpose."⁴³ Chickadee repeats the song throughout his journey, and when he returns home, he sings it to Makoons who has become very ill in the time his twin has been away: "Every time Chickadee sang the song, Makoons could feel his strength grow inside of him."⁴⁴ Reading the song as story, then, it infuses the narrative of *Chickadee* not as a single embedded story but as one that continually reminds the reader of the power of words, and of the strength found in small things.

One of the ways in which the novels affirm the Anishinaabe child, and perhaps even the child reader as important is in the inclusion of children in the knowledge-making process. One of the aspects of the storytelling tradition that Lawrence Gross emphasises is the power of knowledge. He writes: "allowing children to tell stories, then, can be seen as an act of

⁴¹ Ibid, pp. 109-110.

⁴² Erdrich, *Chickadee*, p. 115.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 115.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 191.

empowerment. It recognises that even children have something to contribute."⁴⁵ Far from being in need of the kind of rescue envisioned by the assimilationists from a place of wildness, as I discussed in chapter four, the children of the novels are given agency in accordance with their knowledge of Anishinaabe customs and the natural world. Chickadee's song contributes to his own wellbeing and survival, and he is able to use it to heal his brother in the way that Omakayas, as a child, learned to use plants to heal her family. The importance of stories as a 'knowledge base'⁴⁶ for the society is reflected by their inclusion throughout the novels and in *Makoons*, the suggestion of revitalisation underpins the cultural continuity of which these novels are a part.

Stories as Elders

In chapter four, I suggested that stories, including the Birchbark House series, might function as elders for children who are not exposed to regular oral storytelling. This section will consider the pedagogical imperative of written and oral storytelling, and argue that, as educators, stories by and about Native culture written by Native people for Native and non-native children function as elders by transmitting cultural values. Lawrence Gross explains that "stories are one device by which the Anishinaabeg learn how their culture works in a holistic manner."⁴⁷ Through the embedded stories, the child protagonists learn about the environment, the Anishinaabe spiritual world and how they are to relate to the world around them and to each other. The stories are able to transcend a single situation and offer principles that encompass the whole of the Anishinaabe worldview.

⁴⁵ Gross, *Ways of Knowing*, p. 163.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 162.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 160.

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The series offers stories as pedagogy on two levels; Omakayas' narrative, and the oral tradition from which she learns as a child and teaches as an adult. The embedded stories, in this sense, are integral to the teaching function of the novels as a whole. Michael Wilson, writing about Erdrich's adult novel *The Beet Queen* (1986), says: "the oral traditions are not movable signs of indigenous authenticity, but are integral to the philosophy and structure of the work."⁴⁸ I argue that this is the case in *The Birchbark House* series also, where the oral traditions relate to the circumstances of the time. There is a distinction within the novels between entertainment (a ghost story on a winter's evening), or pragmatic and prophetic stories (a story that offers information about their ancestors, one that explains spirit helpers, or one that recounts events for the benefit of others). By seeing how the oral stories relate to the events of the novels, the reader, whether child or adult, is able to take something not only from the tale being told but to also gain understanding from Omakayas' or the other protagonists' reaction to it in the context of the wider story. The reader sees the benefit of the oral tradition not just as a sign of 'authenticity' but as an embodiment of Anishinaabe values that impacts day to day life.

In *The Porcupine Year*, Nokomis recounts the story of Old Tallow's life to Omakayas, to help her understand more of Tallow's character – "how she got to be so strong and fierce."⁴⁹ I have discussed this story briefly in chapter four as a counterpoint to the development of another character, Two-Strike, but its placement in the novel in the context of pedagogy allows for a slightly different reading. Nokomis introduces the story as "not an adizookaan, a sacred story, or a magical story. I can tell it to you now. Sadly, it is the truth."⁵⁰ The story describes

⁴⁸ Michael D. Wilson, *Writing Home: Indigenous Narratives of Resistance* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2008), p. 61.

⁴⁹ Louise Erdrich, *The Porcupine Year*, (New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 2008), p. 170.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 170.

Tallow's harsh upbringing, including how she got her name (by surviving on the marrow from discarded animal bones). The story's pedagogical imperative, and where Anishinaabe values are most clearly shown is in the decision made by Tallow to allow her suffering to make her "kind to the helpless."⁵¹ Tallow was a rescuer, saving Omakayas as a baby, and giving her life in pursuit of a bear that ensured the survival of the rest of the family. The story is told to Omakayas at the start of her time in the woman's lodge, when she would hear from Nokomis about "what life would be like as a woman."⁵² As a mother figure and role-model, Tallow's story at the start of this process is significant for Omakayas as she begins to learn what it means to be an Anishinaabe woman, and she reacts with sorrow but also with a vision of Old Tallow, or a bear woman – her protector – on a nearby island. Her decision to place a spirit bundle at the site of her vision again links the power of vision to the landscape, ensuring that the memory of Old Tallow is intimately connected to a particular place. The story of Old Tallow, as with other stories throughout the novels, have a clear moral imperative that the listeners may observe.

There is a caveat to discussing stories as pedagogy, though, and that is to understand that although traditional stories are regarded as having a teaching function, and the morals of the stories may be apparent to the reader, they are never made explicit in the context of the narrative. Rather, as Thomas Peacock suggests, "Listeners would draw their own conclusions with no attempts to impose meanings."⁵³ Similarly, Gross explains,

the narrator allows the listener to develop an individual understanding of the lesson being conveyed. As such, the stories are designed to engage the listener, implanting seeds for later reflection and contemplation.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Erdrich, *The Porcupine Year*, p. 179.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 180.

⁵³ Thomas Peacock, 'Teaching as Story' in *Centring Anishinaabe Studies: Understanding the World Through Stories* ed. by Jill Doerfler et. al., (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2013), p. 105.

⁵⁴ Gross, *Ways of Knowing*, p. 208.

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This can be understood through a reading of the vision mentioned above. In the story of Tallow's life, Nokomis tells Omakayas the story, and then gives her space in the woman's lodge to reflect on Tallow's kindness. As a result of this time thinking during her fast, and the subsequent vision she receives, Omakayas decides how to honour Tallow's spirit:

she thought she saw someone moving on the island. It was the wind, it was a woman, a bear woman. Old Tallow. Perhaps she saw someone out there, perhaps she did not [...] she would place Old Tallow's spirit bundle on that island. That would be Old Tallow's island, and Omakayas would think of it as a sacred resting place for her spirit every time she saw it.⁵⁵

The story of Old Tallow's life ends as Omakayas' began – alone on a small island. This narrative circularity marks the end of Omakayas' childhood period with Tallow as protector, now, in adulthood, Omakayas will honour Tallow's spirit and remember her generosity. Tallow's story continues to influence Omakayas and her family, even without her physical presence. Tallow becomes a bear-woman, a spiritual presence, and a legend, her actions re-enacted by Omakayas' sons as they dramatise the stories Omakayas tells.⁵⁶ In Greg Sarris' *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, he leaves the story open to interpretation – but this, too, has consequences, as Frances Washburn suggests:

Sarris [...] seems to invite the reader to interpret the information for her/himself. The invitation without guidelines invites misunderstandings. Further, many readers are not motivated to seek any understanding beyond the superficial, especially when the text is not read by choice but is only part of a required course in Native American literature"⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Erdrich, *The Porcupine Year*, p. 180.

⁵⁶ Louise Erdrich, *Chickadee*, (New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 2012), pp. 1-2.

⁵⁷ Frances Washburn, 'The Risk of Misunderstanding in Greg Sarris' *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts,' *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 16.3 (2004), pp. 70-82, p.71

Sarris' intention, to recreate the orality (and lack of imposed meaning) in textual form may result in an unhelpful misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the stories outside of their cultural context. By filtering the reader's understanding through Omakayas' point of view, Erdrich avoids this whilst still demonstrating the openness with which stories were (and are), shared and applied in everyday life.

So far this section has considered the pedagogical function of stories, but by taking into account recent work by Anishinaabe author Carter Meland, it is possible to see how stories can also perform the function of elder. Another way of thinking about Erdrich's work is by considering her alongside other Anishinaabe authors, and Meland's work offers a valuable comparison. Meland's novel, *Stories for a Lost Child* (2017), focuses on an Anishinaabe girl who knows little of her Native heritage until she receives a bundle of written stories from her grandfather. Unlike Erdrich's series, the stories are told in absence, through letters, and do not have the same direct connection to the reader's lived experience. The stories are a mixture of history, science fiction, and memoir that convey Anishinaabe values but lack a rootedness in a community that enacts those values. Nonetheless, the stories are a vital point of connection to Anishinaabe identity.

The discursive function of letters enacts a form of continuance, as the reading of Meland's novel shows. Whilst the focus of the novel is on fictional letters and a one-way transmission from grandfather to granddaughter, it echoes the ways in which letters have been used to maintain ties to communities during times of separation, such as the removal of Native children to government boarding schools. Brenda Child describes the twofold function of letters, from those sent by the school to the parents "telling convincing stories about the

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prosperity and success of those who learned trades,” and the letters between children and parents and parents and the school, in which experiences were shared and negotiated.⁵⁸

In the letter that accompanies the stories of Meland’s novel, written by ‘Jimmy,’ it is explained how Grandpa described himself “as also lost, but said he wrote stories that helped him make sense of loss.”⁵⁹ The stories were written down with the intention of being passed on to the grandchild, an exercise in mutual enrichment that connects the ‘lost’ grandpa and the granddaughter he never meets. For Fiona, the teenage protagonist, the stories help her to make sense of the loss she feels at her mother’s silence on her Anishinaabe history:

mom just kept the past to herself – but it was their past, not hers [...] if Mom would talk about who they were, it might help her feel less lost.⁶⁰

Fiona is cut off from stories about Ojibwe culture by the absence of her biological elder and her mother’s refusal to engage with that ‘side’ of her past, hurt by the abandonment she felt when her father left. The novel draws together stories and points of view that centre the present action in the place Fiona lives, imbuing the strange collection of stories with a common thread of place and purpose.

The written stories fulfil the role of elder for Fiona by helping her to understand her past. Just as Nokomis explains to Omakayas stories about her beginning, her family, and Anishinaabe values, Fiona’s grandfather writes in his stories explanations for the origins of the earth, Anishinaabe ways of knowing, and connection to the spiritual world. Like Erdrich, Meland draws out a specifically Anishinaabe world, and emphasises the interconnectedness of everything: “It’s easier for most people to pretend things are divided rather than connected

⁵⁸ Brenda J Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998) p. 69.

⁵⁹ Carter Meland, *Stories for a Lost Child*, (East Lansing, MI: Michigan University Press, 2017), p. 18.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 7.

[...] it's easier to think that the city and the woods, Anishinaabe and White, and priest and medicine man differ from one another – rather than seeing the ways they join along the river.”⁶¹ In offering this kind of rhetoric, Grandpa's stories are also redemptive. He embodies human nature and its fallibility, exposing himself as an unreliable narrator: “Honesty is elusive” whilst expressing that the stories contain truths: “telling you true things with the stories I make up.”⁶² These are not sacred stories, like the *adisookan* of Erdrich's narrative. They open up a world of connection for Fiona, whilst helping her to come to terms with the absence of her grandfather and to identify herself within an Anishinaabe tradition. Grandpa's stories have the ability to transcend his unreliability, as Fiona comments in the novel, “His stories were better than thinking about his life.”⁶³ For Fiona, the stories her Grandpa has written are a step towards making sense of her loss – of him, and of her cultural identity. In Meland's novel, the oral tradition becomes (necessarily) a written one, and by connecting stories of the past with the next generation it is possible to see how his stories renew ties to Anishinaabe culture and help to ensure its survival.

Another significant effort in connecting young people with traditional and sacred stories is *The Mishomis Book* by Edward Benton-Banai. Benton-Banai was a spiritual leader of the Lac Court Oreilles Band of Ojibway, and a founder of the American Indian Movement. I have referred to the retelling of the Great Flood story in Benton-Banai's book, alongside which he includes many other important stories of the Ojibway that are credited in the acknowledgements to ‘grandfathers and grandmothers’, particularly the elders of the ‘Lac Court Oreilles Reservation and other Indian communities in Wisconsin.’⁶⁴ It is important to note

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 50.

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 52.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 55.

⁶⁴ Benton-Banai, ‘Acknowledgements’, *The Mishomis Book*, p. iii.

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that the stories in *The Mishomis Book* are not fictional in the way that many (but not all) of Erdrich's embedded stories are, but are combined to form a narrative of the history of the Ojibway people.

It is a fairly straightforward assertion to suggest that Benton-Banai's book functions as an elder in content alone, since it contains significant Anishinaabe stories with the intention of educating children and making the stories, the history of the Anishinaabe, more widely known and available. The relational intent of the book is clear from the beginning, with the stories introduced as "a journey to rediscover a way of life."⁶⁵ The form in which the stories are presented adds weight to this assertion, as they are written down as though spoken, with the effect that the reader is drawn into the orality of the storytelling process. The illustrations add to the immersive nature of the book with detailed pictures of the interior of Mishomis' cabin and depictions of events.

Throughout the book, the orality of the narrative is made apparent again and again, and connections made between the stories and the life of the reader. In chapter two, Benton-Banai writes: "Boozhoo, I have more Ojibway stories to tell you. These e-ki-an-ma'-di-win' (teachings) have been handed down to me by my Grandfathers."⁶⁶ This opening phrase welcomes the reader in Anishinaabemowin, and establishes the significance (teachings) and provenance (from Grandfathers) of the stories. At the end of the chapter, the reader is told to apply the teachings to their lives: "Today, we should use these ancient teachings to live our lives in harmony with the plan that the creator gave us."⁶⁷ The instructional nature of the book is in accordance with the idea that the morals of the stories are not made explicit – at the end

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 2.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 5.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 9.

of chapter three, for example, the reader is implored to “Think about all these teachings and the lessons they have for you.”⁶⁸ The teaching function of the stories is therefore collaborative, with the responsibility placed on the reader to interpret and act upon the events of the story.

It could be argued that all stories contain a didactic function, especially those written for children. Hans-Heino Ewers suggests that children “think in terms of stories” and can discover “fundamental truths in stories” long before they can ‘think in abstract terms.’⁶⁹ The stories contained within Erdrich’s, and Meland’s novels, as well as the main narratives themselves, are an example of how the world can be understood through stories. Those stories are arguably more vital in a culture that is focused on survivance, to use Vizenor’s term. The stories, as indigenous narratives, combat “cultural and historical erasure”⁷⁰ as they teach the next generation and perpetuate an Anishinaabe worldview.

Stories as mino-bimaadiziwin

This section considers the stories as mino-bimaadiziwin, or as teachers of the ‘good life’ for the Anishinaabe. Lawrence Gross has written that the “Anishinaabe themselves are loath to establish a limited, set definition of this term”⁷¹ and it is not my intention to try and impose one. However, for the purposes of discussion I choose to use Cary Miller’s interpretation of the term as “the Ojibwe moral ideal [...] life lived well, comprised of longevity, good health, and freedom from misfortune.”⁷² Throughout this chapter I have shown how the Anishinaabe values (and worldview) are communicated through stories. This section will signal more

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 19.

⁶⁹ Hans-Heino Ewers, ‘Children’s Literature and the Traditional Art of Storytelling’, *Poetics Today*, 13.1 (1992), 169-178, p. 176.

⁷⁰ Nicholas G. Cragoe, ‘Narrating Indigenous Boundaries: Postcolonial and Decolonial Storytelling in Northern Minnesota’, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 23.2, (2017), 182-202, p. 191.

⁷¹ Gross, ‘Cultural Sovereignty’, p. 128.

⁷² Cary Miller, ‘Every Dream Is a Prophecy’, in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World Through Stories*, ed. by Jill Doerfler et. al., (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2013), p. 120.

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explicitly the ways in which the series itself, and the oral tradition more broadly, contribute to the expression of Anishinaabe values and the development of *mino-bimaadiziwin* in the lives of the characters.

David Treuer describes the attributes of traditional Ojibwe stories in a list, characterising them by a lack of first person narration; motivation, subjectivity, or time-dependence (in that they do not take place at specific moments in time and do not precede or follow one another in an order), and they are literal, stable, and stylistically simple.⁷³ Writing about these attributes in the context of *Love Medicine*, Treuer comments that in terms of “structure, style and content”, *Love Medicine* does not share the attributes of traditional tales. He goes on to observe, however, that “culture, as a *concept*, as an *idea* promoted by the characters, culture as a subject, is a very important part of the book”⁷⁴ (emphasis original). Treuer’s criticism is that Erdrich’s novels are often taken as authentic traditional stories even though “Erdrich does not claim that [they] function as such.”⁷⁵ This is problematic for Native American fiction more generally – the suggestion that anything written by a Native author can be read as ‘authentic’ and representative of an indigenous viewpoint. However, this largely is a problem caused by the uncritical reader, rather than the authors who strive to at turns subvert expectations or stereotypes, explore the possibilities of an indigenous literature, and as Erdrich does in this series, present a specifically Anishinaabe understanding of history. In fact, this is perhaps one of the most significant arguments for a tribally-specific understanding of the literature that refuses, in its own creation, the pressure of ‘speaking for’ the assumed ‘Native culture’ that they are read as representative of. Although *Love Medicine* and *The Birchbark House* series may not be considered a traditional tale by Treuer’s criteria, *The*

⁷³ David Treuer, *Native American Fiction: A User’s Manual* (St Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2006), pp. 54-55.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 56.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 50.

Birchbark House series may productively be read as somewhere in-between, combining traditional (cultural) stories with stories that could not themselves be considered traditional but nonetheless promote cultural values, language, and mino-bimaadiziwin.

Margaret Noodin has observed, in relation to Treuer's analysis, that "The series itself [...] does not conform to the traditional Anishinaabe aesthetics."⁷⁶ However, the novels embody the principles of mino-bimaadiziwin through structural observance of the seasonal round, an emphasis on relationship with family and the wider environment on which they are dependent, and through the embedding of traditional *adisookan*. The sacred stories are given a position in the narrative that explains their function, tells the reader if they are sacred or important to a particular time of year, and importantly, relates them to everyday life, as Gross writes: "For the Anishinaabeg, sacred stories are not something that happened long ago in a far off place. They are alive and functioning in everyday life."⁷⁷ This understanding of stories offers a layer of complication to Noodin's reading of the series as not-quite fitting Treuer's analysis, as the *Birchbark* novels contain a range of 'types' of story, as well as the overarching narrative, that operate in a variety of ways.

The story discussed earlier in this chapter, 'Nanabozho and Muskrat make an earth', was read in the context of empowerment. It also shows principles of mino-bimaadiziwin, as it values the contributions of the weakest individual, and describes the interdependence of living things. As a sacred story, it can also be considered "*manidoog* (manitous), living beings who

⁷⁶ Margaret Noodin, 'Language Revitalisation, Anishinaabemowin, and Erdrich's *The Birchbark House Series*', in *Frontiers in American Children's Literature*, ed. by Dorothy Clark and Linda Salem, (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016), pp. 123-159, p. 126.

⁷⁷ Gross, *Ways of Knowing*, p. 160.

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work with Anishinaabeg in the interests of demonstrating principles necessary for *mino-bimaadiziwin*, that good and beautiful life.”⁷⁸

The story as a living being can be understood in terms of its relatedness to, and influence on everyday life; the story itself is carried with the people and its multiple variants show how it is adapted and so kept alive. There is only one embedded story within the series that is known to be an *adisookan*, an animate, *manidoog* story, and that is the story of the flood. It may be that this is due to sensitivity about recording stories which are considered sacred, and this story is well-known and recorded elsewhere, so Erdrich’s use of it in the novels is not the first written representation. Indeed, as I have shown, it is a story that has been told in various written contexts, including a version in the preface to Jill Doerfler’s edited collection, *Centering Anishinaabe Studies*.⁷⁹ Treuer, Magdaleno and Allen observe that “the use of tribal traditions outside tribal contexts carries enormous risks [...] Once these traditions enter the marketplace of fiction, they become commodified.”⁸⁰ There is a balance to be found between respecting the sanctity of a powerful oral tradition, and ensuring the survival of that tradition by sharing the stories widely. Margaret Noodin writes: “one of the most productive ways to read Louise Erdrich is as an Anishinaabe storyteller whose works echo the patterns of Anishinaabe language and storytelling.”⁸¹ Erdrich’s ‘compromise’ on the inclusion of sacred stories is to focus on the practice of storytelling rather than necessarily including sacred stories. By incorporating non-sacred *dibaajimowinan* into her narrative, and through innovative uses

⁷⁸ Jill Doerfler, et al. ‘Bagijige: Making an Offering’, in *Centering Anishinaabe Studies*, ed. by Jill Doerfler et. al., pp. xv-xxvii, (pp. xvii-xviii).

⁷⁹ John Borrows, ‘Maajitaadaa: Nanaboozhoo and the Flood, Part 2’, in *Centering Anishinaabe Studies*, ed. by Jill Doerfler et. al., pp. ix-xiv.

⁸⁰ Wilson, *Writing Home*, p. 44.

⁸¹ Noodin, *Bawaajimo*, p. 47.

of form, Erdrich is able to perpetuate Anishinaabe cultural values by weaving them into the fabric of her stories.

Stories as Revitalisation (Language and Culture)

This thesis focuses on the inclusion of Anishinaabe cultural values and practices in Erdrich's texts for children. Integral to the shaping of an Anishinaabe worldview is language. Erdrich incorporates a glossary of Anishinabemowin terms and leaves many words untranslated within the text. For instance, a list of food includes the phrases 'a makuk of special powdered fish' and 'a little manomin.'⁸² From the glossary the reader learns that 'makuk' is a container made from birchbark and 'manomin' is wild rice. These terms, amongst others, are repeated in context frequently throughout the narrative. One effect of this is to normalise language and familiarise readers with common terms. Margaret Noodin, who has written extensively about the Ojibwe language use, comments on the inclusion of these everyday words: "Learning *aaniin*, *enya*, *gaawiin*, *howah*, and *daga* reminds readers that children in many cultures quickly learn to say "hello," "yes," "no," "wow," and "please." These phrases move the language from a formal distant artefact to something living and able to reflect everyday experience."⁸³ As with the stories themselves, which can be understood as living and ahistorical, that is, they can exist outside of time and be relevant to all Anishinaabe at all times, untranslated language within the text recognises Anishinabemowin as a language that is still spoken and can be read and understood by children and adult readers alike.

The inclusion of Anishinabemowin supports the revitalisation of indigenous language through the practice of code-switching, that is, the mixing of two languages within discourse

⁸² Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, p. 196.

⁸³ Noodin, 'Language Revitalisation', in Clark and Salem, eds., p. 125.

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and in this case, narrative (which may be read aloud). If, as I have argued, the stories embedded within the narrative are examples of specific cultural knowledge and values that connect the reader to a specific Anishinaabe worldview, then similarly, the language used to tell those stories has significance as the means by which those stories become disseminated and understood. Sophie McCall writes: “‘code-switching’ [...] suggests that different languages hold different ideas, cultural values, and specific knowledge that are worthwhile to stay connected to.”⁸⁴ An example from the text is the use of Anishinaabe terms to describe settlers. ‘Chimookoman’ is translated in the text when it first appears in *The Birchbark House*, and is then used for the most part untranslated to refer to white settlers. Similarly, words for mother, father, and grandmother – arguably the first thing a child learns to say – are mostly written in Anishinaabemowin. Code-switching occurs in storytelling when Deydey tells a ghost story in which an argument between three ghosts is keeping him awake:

‘Hey, you ladies, be quiet! Someone is trying to sleep here,’ I called. For a while, they lowered their voices, and then their argument broke out again and they started to shout. They had settled down to quarrel near my canoe and I was now steaming mad. ‘Bekayaan!’ I yelled at them, loud and harsh, to be quiet.⁸⁵

Switching to Anishinaabemowin when the first attempt to hush the ghosts was unsuccessful further situates the tale within the Anishinaabe tradition of the windigo, or ‘hungry ghost’ and Deydey draws upon the teachings of his father to provide a conclusion to the story, scaring the ghosts by pretending to be a bear. “Luckily, I thought of my father’s advice. Never let fear take your mind away [...] and into my mind, once I let myself hear it, a plan came.”⁸⁶ The bear motif,

⁸⁴ McCall, et.al., eds, *Read, Listen, Tell*, p. 124

⁸⁵ Erdrich, *The Birchbark House*, p. 63.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 65.

here used by Deydey as a fictional construct that can overpower the windigo, contributes to the reader's understanding of the bear that throughout the series is shown to be a healer and a powerful protector, described by Nokomis as a 'different kind of people'.⁸⁷

The significance of the bear is further explored in two of the embedded stories, one in the *Porcupine Year*, told just after Old Tallow's death, and one in *Makoons*, told after Nokomis' death. The bear stories, by their placement in the narrative, offer the characters a means of connection to those passed – Omakayas is able to think of Old Tallow as a protective spirit, and Quill, ever concerned about his stomach, is reminded of the food provided by Tallow. In *The Porcupine Year*, Nokomis tells stories in winter, while the family is mourning, to "help them gain their strength and laugh again."⁸⁸ The two stories share the theme of the figure of the bear as protector and provider. In 'The Bear Girl Makoons', three sisters are "loved just the same" by their parents, "even though the youngest was a bear." When the human sisters travel to find husbands, they tie their bear sister up in some rushes so that she can't follow them, but she catches up with them, the rushes still tied to her back. They try two more times, tying her to a rock and then a pine tree, and each time she follows them carrying the rock and then the tree on her back. She tells them: "I just love you, and you can't get along without me. I know things and I can do things." Her knowledge saves their lives and she finds them husbands. Her husband, though, rejects her, and she tells him that he can get rid of her by throwing her in the fire. He does, and she transforms into a beautiful human girl, but one who has lost the special powers she had as a bear. The story reminds Omakayas of her bear spirit, and she acknowledges that Old Tallow's spirit might now also protect her.⁸⁹ When Omakayas tells a story in *Makoons*, as previously mentioned, it marks a return to storytelling within the narrative

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 207.

⁸⁸ Erdrich, *The Porcupine Year*, p. 122.

⁸⁹ Ibid, pp. 122-129.

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and is introduced with Nokomis' words: "Mewinzha, mewinzha." Taking on the role of storyteller, Omakayas chooses as her first story one about a shape-shifting bear woman who provides for a hunter by making him beautiful moccasins, and prepares his cabin for his return by lighting the fire and boiling up water. She does this in secret, but when he eventually catches her she asks if he will share his meat with her family, who are poor. He agrees, and again, in secret, she transports their tent and food by stamping on it. Gradually she reveals to him her powers and by the time they reach her father's house "he had fallen in love with the woman and her mystic ways."⁹⁰ She reveals that she and her family are bears who watched the man and were grateful that he never hunted bears even though, she says, "you surely could have killed a lot of us, for you are a great hunter."⁹¹ The man chooses to live as a bear and join the woman's family. The bear, then, is shown to be a healer and protector not just in the wider narrative of the life of Omakayas and her family, but also in these embedded stories.

The protagonists are mirroring, in a way, the process of learning about Anishinaabe culture for the reader through the attentive listening to stories that were told at various times of year for different reasons. By selecting stories for her readers on two levels – Omakayas' narrative and the stories Omakayas hears and tells – Erdrich is able to centre her novels around a storytelling tradition that connects her readers to a vital part of Anishinaabe culture and tradition. The primacy of stories for the survivance of Anishinaabe culture is understood through the form of the novels themselves, and the spatial displacement of the tribe is echoed in the displacement of internal narrative. In addition, the stories perform various functions for the protagonists of the novels and more widely, in the novels' relation to the reader – as elders, empowerment, pedagogy, healing, and connected to temporal and spatial locations that

⁹⁰ Erdrich, *Makoons*, p. 136.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 136.

immerse the reader in Anishinaabe culture. The use of Ojibwe language throughout the novels adds to the multi-layered approach to understanding the story, and works alongside the cyclical narrative structure and embedding of traditional stories to move the narrative from a story about a Native American girl written in English, to a narrative that *evokes* Ojibwe life in a multidimensional way.

I pack a bag containing all of my baby's books, many of which I've laboriously blotted with Wite-Out, removing the English, and replaced with Ojibwe words written in Magic Marker.¹

- Louise Erdrich, *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*

The act of re-inscribing English-language baby books with Ojibwe words is symbolic of the broader acts of literary activism that characterise Erdrich's literary work. Reading *The Birchbark House* as a site of cultural emergence in the crossroads between Children's Literature and Native Studies reveals the reclamation of literary space through the prioritisation of issues that connect the story of Omakayas to the contemporary rights of the Anishinaabe – areas such as land, the female body, and representation in literary and public discourse. One of the key ways in which Erdrich's children's novels reclaim space in literary and popular culture is through the foregrounding of Anishinaabe identity and culture, which whilst not a deliberate act of revisionism, indirectly speaks to the ways in which Indigenous people have been characterised in popular stereotypes.

In this, they do not stand alone as examples of 'new' representation, but are part of a greater explosion of Indigenous representation in contemporary American culture. This thesis is concerned primarily with children's fiction, but recognises that the novels sit within a new wave of representation which permeates the strata of cultural activity so that people of all ages can find versions of 'themselves' in a range of media. During the development of this thesis over the past seven years, widespread awareness of Native issues has gained momentum in politics and popular culture, in part due to high-profile protests over environmental issues and

¹ Louise Erdrich, *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*, (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2003), p. 10.

political sovereignty. Some of the changes to indigenous representation occurring in popular culture are the culmination of years of resistance, such as the 'retirement' of the Cleveland Indians mascot, Chief Wahoo, for the 2019 baseball season. Other campaigns to change stereotypes and racial epithets on the sports field are ongoing, such as the #changethename and #notyourmascot protests. In 2017, Native activists drew attention to the offensive team name of the Washington Redskins football team by creating fake versions of mainstream news sites, claiming that the team name would change in 2018 to the Washington Redhawks. These examples highlight the need to recognise the words and images used by sports teams as racist in order to effect change, which then creates space for derogatory stereotypes to be exposed and overturned.

The focus on sports teams and mascots influences one of the sub-plots in the Emmy-nominated Netflix series, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, created by Tina Fey (2015-2018). The Lakota Indian character Jacqueline White has been passing as a Manhattan socialite since she left her parents and the reservation to become an 'American.' Feeling guilty for what is framed as an abandonment of her heritage, in the third season (2017) she seeks to make amends by marrying into the wealthy Schneider family, owners of the Washington Redskins, in order to influence the board of directors and change the name. The show refers to the Lakota trickster figure Iktomi to point out Jacqueline's own lack of cultural understanding, even as she tries to do 'the right thing'. In this way the show highlights the complex and interwoven issues of privilege and racism as it addresses the debate around twenty-first century Indigenous representation and appropriation.

Two 2017 films featuring Native actors have also drawn attention to political and cultural issues; *Wind River* (Taylor Sheridan), drew attention to the unrecorded disappearances of Native women, and *Hostiles* (Scott Cooper) portrays the violent and turbulent relationship

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between Native tribes and the U.S Army in the frontier of 1892. Wes Studi, the veteran and actor in *Hostiles*, became the first Native American Oscars presenter when he gave an award at the 2018 ceremony, and gave an address in the Cherokee language.

Elsewhere, stereotypical representations are used ironically in order to destabilise them. In the sitcom *Parks and Recreation*, the (fictional) Wamapoke Indian casino owner Ken Hotate uses aspects of Native culture that have been stereotypically rendered as 'Indian', such as curses, dances, and songs, in order to both satisfy and undermine the town's expectations of the local tribe. The actor who plays Ken Hotate, Jonathan Joss (Apache), who also voiced a Native character in animated comedy *King of the Hill*, has described the respect he found for Native culture whilst working on *Parks and Rec* in an interview with Indian Country Today: "He dresses nice. He's not running around behind someone's back. He's a man, an Indian man, and a lot of fun."² This revisioning and repositioning of Indigenous characters as multidimensional cultural agents helps to reshape public perceptions of Native culture within the contemporary American cultural landscape.

The prominence of Indigenous issues in mainstream culture, and growing awareness of them, is in part attributable to the growth in hashtag culture and the use of social media. Over the past few years, protests relating to Indigenous rights' issues have been carried out across physical and online spheres, such as #IdleNoMore, #NODAPL, #NotYourMascot, and #Changethename. The collection of stories, poems and artwork edited by Lisa Charleyboy and Mary Beth Leatherdale (2018) takes the title #NotYourPrincess, and is dedicated to "every Indigenous woman who has ever been called Pocahontas."³ Marketed as a 'crossover' between

² Dustin Tahmahkera, 'Actor Jonathan Joss talks 'Parks and Rec,' 'King of the Hill,' and his NAMA nomination.' *Indian Country Today*, 4 March 2013. Available at <<https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/culture/arts-entertainment/actor-jonathan-joss-talks-parks-and-rec-king-of-the-hill-and-his-nama-nomination>>

³ Lisa Charleyboy and Mary Beth Leatherdale, *#NotYourPrincess: Voices of Native American Women*, (Toronto: Annick Press, 2018), p. 3.

adult and young adult non-fiction, the book shares the experiences of twenty-first century Indigenous women in America, foregrounding issues of identity, stereotyping and representation. It follows the wide-reaching international #metoo movement in terms of sharing stories of violence against Indigenous women, whilst focusing the message of the book on strength, empowerment and survival.

The story of Shelby Lisk (Mohawk) describes the difficulty of asserting an Indigenous identity that doesn't fit stereotypical models of indigeneity or 'Indianness'. She writes:

When I say I'm Haudenosaunee, they want me to look a certain way. Act a certain way. They're disappointed when what they get is [...] just me. White-faced, red-haired. They spent hundreds of years trying to assimilate my ancestors, trying to create Indians who could blend in like me. But now they don't want me either. I'm not Indian enough.⁴

Lisk's reference to the centuries of assimilation that have resulted in her lack of perceived Indianness exposes the irony of settler culture that has imposed a narrow definition of 'Indian', effectively limiting expressions of indigeneity. This real-life account echoes the question expressed by Cynthia Leitich Smith's (Muskogee Creek) children's novel, *Rain is Not My Indian Name* (2001). The protagonist, a teenage girl named Cassidy Rain Berghoff, grapples with her Indian heritage as a minority in a white town, and the questions asked of her by her white classmates, such as "How much Indian are you?" or "You don't seem Indian to me." Rain muses: "I've never asked about the phrase 'seem Indian,' but I figure it involves construction-paper feathers, a plastic paint pony, and Malibu Pocahontas."⁵ As she learns more about her own indigenous community, she realises that she does not have to be the essentialised Indian of other people's imagination in order to celebrate her Indian heritage. The question of representation, then, is pertinent to the study of children's and young adult fiction as a growing

⁴ Ibid, p. 65.

⁵ Cynthia Leitich Smith, *Rain is Not my Indian Name*, (London: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 48-9.

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body of writers including Erdrich, engage with the questions of identity, the definitional struggle of Indianness, and its ramifications in personal, political and cultural spaces. The stories contained in *#NotYourPrincess* and elsewhere are a stark reminder that whilst representation and awareness of Indigenous lives, rights and issues may be gradually changing, there is clearly scope for more widespread change. This is where Erdrich's *Birchbark House* series contributes most to the development of new Indigenous representation.

Children's literature as a vehicle for Native American cultural values has, as Lorie Roy argues, "grown beyond the retelling of cultural stories to telling the stories of contemporary life or addressing sensitive topics."⁶ Recent and forthcoming children's and young adult fiction by Indigenous authors ranges from picture-books to graphic novels that touch on issues of Native history, identity and contemporary life. Spokane author Sherman Alexie's picture-book, *Thunder Boy Jr.* (2016) is about a young boy's search for a new name and an identity that is not bound to his own father. Eric Gansworth's YA novel, *If I Ever Get Out of Here*, (2013) is set in 1970s New York and tells the story of a reservation Indian teenager who tries to fit in at a mostly white school. Chickasaw astronaut John Herrington's picture-book, *Mission to Space* (2016) was highlighted by Debbie Reese for its tribal specificity, and inclusion of Chickasaw language and culture within the story of his childhood and preparing to go to space with NASA on the space shuttle *Endeavour*.⁷ The 2016 children's novel, *I Am Not a Number*, by Jenny Kay Dupuis and Kathy Kacer, tells the story of a girl removed to a residential home in Canada. These texts all focus complex contemporary issues whilst many, like the *Birchbark House* series, reach

⁶ Lorie Roy, 'Indigenous Children's Literature,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature*, ed. by James H. Cox and Daniel Heath Justice, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 333-343, p. 334.

⁷ More about this title and Debbie's recommendation can be read here:

<<https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.co.uk/2016/10/john-herringtons-mission-to-space-is.html>>

back into the past in order to dramatise Indigenous history and preserve those stories for future generations.

Language revitalisation, as I have discussed, is also a key part of some contemporary indigenous fiction. Erdrich's own commitment to this endeavour is evident through the Birchbark House non-profit organisation and its publishing arm, Wiigwaas Press, which she co-founded with her sister, the poet Heid Erdrich. The press has published several books for children in Anishinabemowin. This thesis has concentrated on Anishinabemowin in Anishinaabe literature, but further study could give attention to other Native-language texts for children, such as Julie Flett's *Wild Berries/ Pakwa che Menisu*, (Cree, 2014), Caitlin Nicholson's acclaimed picture-book, *Nipêhon/ I Wait* (Cree, 2017), and Julie Flett's *Owls See Clearly at Night* (Michif, 2010).

In addition to Indigenous-language books, there have been a range of video games and graphic novels that help Native children see themselves in popular culture, as well as combatting negative stereotypes. This "reclamation for Indigenous storytellers," as Selena Mills describes it, offers new ways of learning about Indian culture and language. An Anishinaabe language video-game called *Honour Water* (2016) teaches songs about preserving and protecting water. A game called *Survivance* (2013) created by Elizabeth LaPensée enables players to choose non-linear quests that explore "philosophical themes of presence." *Path of the Elders* is an educational game based on Treaty 9 (the James Bay Treaty) between the Canadian government and the Cree and Ojibwa people.⁸ These games signify new cross-media

⁸ These games, and others, are recommended by Selena Mills in the following online article: Selena Mills, '17 Beautiful Indigenous Comic Books and Video Games for Kids,' 9 January 2018, *CBC/Radio-Canada*, Available at <<http://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/how-the-comic-book-and-gaming-community-is-reclaiming-indigenous-perspectiv>>

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indigenous representation that permeates sub-cultures, opening up new imaginary spaces in which indigenous children and young people can see themselves.

Graphic novels are also a growing area of Indigenous revitalisation that re-mythologise Indigenous culture in a way that projects agency and invulnerability. Recent publications include Matt Dembicki's *Trickster: Native American Tales*, (2010); Jen Storm's *Fire Starters* (2017), Katherena Vermette, *A Girl Called Echo* (2017) and Arigon Starr's collection, *Tales of the Mighty Code Talkers* (2016). In addition, Marvel comics have recently announced the creation of a new female superhero, an Inuit teenager from Nunavut called Snowguard, who will have shapeshifting powers. Confronting stereotypes is only one aspect of this renaissance of Indigenous, and in particular, Anishinaabe, presence in popular culture and media. Across the spectrum of literature, television, film, video games and graphic novels, these new works are literally changing the narrative by inscribing Native presence onto forms dominated by settler culture. The themes explored by these graphic novels, video games and texts include environmental protection, land rights, U.S. history, contemporary American Indian culture and family. The *Birchbark House* series can be considered alongside these innovative texts and media as not only sharing similar themes, but as contributing to the broader spectrum of Indigenous storytelling in popular culture. They are a part of a more widespread effort to revitalise storytelling and the promotion of cultural values through diverse forms of media for children and young adults.

This thesis argues for the importance of changing the narrative in children's books as the "first line of defence"⁹ against cultural misrepresentation or historical erosion. The contemporary resurgence of Indigenous storytelling across other forms of media creates a

⁹ See Daniel Heath Justice and James H. Cox, eds., 'Introduction', *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 9.

context which ensures the *Birchbark House* series does not have to be read in isolation, or by a limited audience. The wave of new media representation caters for a broad spectrum of ages and tribal affiliation. Nonetheless, I argue that as children's fiction, the novels offer the first opportunity to build a bigger cultural and historical picture that upends the homogeneity of the dominant white narrative as the first point at which young children encounter the world around them and begin to consider their place within it.

The voices of children recorded by Doris Seale and Beverley Slapin in *A Broken Flute* attest to this, such as the story I referred to in the introduction to this thesis of the young student who, upset by the portrayal of Indian culture in the class text *Caddie Woodlawn*, persuaded her teacher to replace it with *The Birchbark House*. This is an example of how *The Birchbark House* texts can make a difference to the representation of Native culture in school classrooms when it is chosen over other children's texts that rely on overtly historical or stereotyped representations. There is no standardised curriculum in the United States, which makes data on the usage of *The Birchbark House* in the classroom difficult to obtain. Its value as a classroom text is observable, however, through blog posts, social media sharing, and websites for teacher resources both in the U.S. and the U.K. which gives an indication of its reach. The Montana Office of Public Instruction, Indian Education Division published a teacher's guide (2012) for a text-based enquiry unit based on *The Birchbark House*. Similar model classroom units that use *The Birchbark House* are available online from the Louisiana Department of Education, and the State of New Jersey Department of Education. Online teaching resources have been published by the publishers HarperCollins and Pearson Education, and shared by teachers on Pinterest, TES, and 'teachervision' websites.

The teaching guides above show that the novels are used in some schools as representative of Native American life at the time of settler colonialism. This makes one of the

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primary areas of concern for this thesis – the tribal specificity of Erdrich’s writing – all the more significant. It is widely understood that when Native Americans are not thought of as eradicated or vanishing, the range of diverse nations and cultures is reduced to characteristic images: clothing, tipis, mascots. The work of Adrienne Keene in confronting appropriations of Native culture, or Debbie Reese in assessing the representation of Native people within children’s literature, and the promotion of this work through social media has, in the twenty-first century, raised awareness of the everyday appropriation, misuse, and misunderstanding of indigenous cultures in the United States. This thesis has offered a reading of the texts that focuses on their nature as tribally-specific, Anishinaabe literature, though for many readers the texts may be understood as part of the wider context of American Indian literary nationalism. At points throughout the novels Erdrich refutes the supposed homogeneity of Native culture by showing how the band of Ojibwe to which Omakayas belongs fought with, negotiated with, and lived alongside other Native nations.

The value of this understanding is that it develops an awareness of tribal specificity – whilst rightly being understood as Native American literature, it is specifically Anishinaabe literature and reflects the practices and livelihood of one particular family. This sense is echoed in Carter Meland’s novel, *Letters for a Lost Child*. The letters received by the main character from her grandfather remind her that she is Anishinaabe, not ‘Native American’, and to understand her Indian heritage she must understand her Anishinaabe origins. Similarly, *The Mishomis Book* by Edward Benton-Banai offers a set of stories from creation to the seven fires prophecy that explains the Ojibwe worldview. Whilst there are undoubtedly connections and similarities between the beliefs of different Native nations, these texts help readers to understand Anishinaabe culture first and foremost.

One of the ways that this is achieved is through the inclusion of Anishinaabe storytelling within the narrative. Chapter five explored storytelling as a significant means of educating children into Anishinaabe customs, and traces the incorporation of the oral tradition into the written narrative of *The Birchbark House*. The blending of Anishinaabe storytelling practices with the form of the novel and the English language demonstrates what Elizabeth Archuleta describes as “the power of language to heal, to regenerate, and to recreate, correcting misinformation and stereotypes long advocated by outsiders.”¹⁰ In this way the novels themselves are an act of recreation, and as children’s fiction they particularly embody a regeneration not only of an awareness and understanding of Anishinaabe culture, people and history, but that this is achieved through a regeneration of language use. The Ojibwe language, Anishinabemowin, is used throughout the book and is also being taught in schools and colleges, so that these and other more fully bilingual novels contribute to a broader sense of revitalisation.

The significance of the series as a form of memoir or family history is crucial to the understanding of the novels as an act of survivance, as Erdrich herself becomes the link between the past and the present. As such, the novels directly address the temporal displacement of Indigenous people, combatting, as Lorie Roy describes it, the “stereotype that Native people exist only in the past.”¹¹ This is important when reading the novels as an indication of the Anishinaabe worldview in the present day, and by reading them alongside critical Anishinaabe studies this thesis is able to demonstrate that the values portrayed in the narrative as the Anishinaabe worldview are consistent with contemporary understandings of

¹⁰ Elizabeth Archuleta, “‘I Give You Back’: Indigenous Women Writing to Survive”, *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Series 2, 18.4 (2006), pp. 88-114, p. 91.

¹¹ Lorie Roy, 'Indigenous Children's Literature', in Justice and Cox, eds., p. 335.

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Anishinaabe culture and values in the present day. In this sense, the texts reach beyond temporal and geographical boundaries.

The reclamation of physical and cultural spaces is central to Erdrich's own activism in the areas of land rights and women's rights. These issues are foregrounded in much of her adult fiction which has thematically considered the intersections between reservation and city, the challenges of maintaining tradition in the present day, and the abuses of women within and outside of Indigenous communities. In chapter two, I explained how the convictions underpinning Erdrich's involvement in recent land protests, such as resistance to the Dakota Access pipeline, can be traced in her children's fiction through the characters' commentary on deforestation and habitat destruction, as well as the central concern of the narrative which is the series of movements caused by settler colonialism and westward expansion. In chapter four, I considered Erdrich's writing of gender roles and family, demonstrating how her children's texts follow her adult fiction in creating matrilineal patterns that accept gender difference and adoption within loosely conventional family structures. Erdrich's evident commitment to addressing issues of women's rights takes on added significance in the wake of the #metoo campaign and the series of allegations against powerful male figures in many industries, including within the Native American community.

The stories within Lisa Charleyboy's collection, *#NotYourPrincess*, as I discussed earlier, are also significant in this regard as they address not only stereotypes of Indigenous women, but also issues of serial violence and disappearance by sharing stories of survivors and of women who are breaking the cycle of abuse within their own communities. Within literature and popular culture, the emergence of new female characters that reflect and model Indigenous womanhood support the process of changing perceptions of Indian women who are now recovering their identity after decades of assimilation. For the child reader in

particular, who is learning about the world and their place in it, having characters that offer a positive representation of their culture and gender is crucial.

Given the importance of tribal specificity in creating visibility for individual tribes, and Erdrich's own commitment to the Anishinaabe worldview in her writing, there is an ironic risk, in the classroom and elsewhere, that Erdrich's novels are read as representative of a 'Native American' worldview. That said, her significance and position in the field of Native American literature elevates the *Birchbark House* series and, I argue, lends a degree of 'authenticity' and gravitas to the series that a less established author might not have been afforded. This is undoubtedly a problem with the reading public and the expectations of those working in the production, selection and distribution of children's literature, rather than with Erdrich or the novels themselves. Erdrich's position has given her a welcome voice in the growing field of Native children's fiction, one which creates space for Anishinaabe and other Native voices by reclaiming literary spaces and elevating public discourse on indigenous issues.

The Birchbark House series, then, can be read in the context of Erdrich's own activism and the growing voice of Native women, as an empowering story for girls that offers a female-centred account of traditional Anishinaabe life. The series explores various possibilities for gendered space by focusing on and celebrating a range of qualities that are embodied by female characters, whilst not being necessarily 'feminine.' In fact, by modelling multiple gender identities within her fiction, Erdrich creates a text that is also empowering for boys who do not perform traditional 'masculine' roles. The children's novel as a site of activism reflects contemporary concerns about the way children view themselves and the world, and through the temporal and cultural space created by using historical settings and frameworks, Erdrich draws attention to the issues facing Indigenous people today.

Conclusion

This thesis explores the intersection of Children's Literature and Native Studies, and one of the challenges of this work has been the reconciliation of Anishinaabe children's fiction with Western modes of thought about childhood and its literature. I have considered what it means for these novels to be understood as children's fiction, and in many ways the current scholarly work in the field of children's literature has been a useful starting point for discussing themes and ideas that are at the interstices of children's fiction and Native studies, such as those that form the structure of the chapters. This study has not held indigenous literature up to Western theory and found it wanting, but has used existing frameworks and patterns of children's literature, explored in chapter one, to show how the novels' prioritisation of Anishinaabe culture intersects with, and diverges from the existing literary theory. In conclusion, I contend that the rapid rise of Anishinaabe representation in popular and literary culture demands a new methodology of indigenous children's literature. This thesis has drawn on the growth of Anishinaabe studies over the past six years by scholars such as Lawrence Gross, Jill Doerfler, Brenda Child, and Linda LeGarde Grover, amongst others, in order to situate this series within relevant and emerging tribal scholarship. The development of an indigenous methodology for children's literature would embody a new critical space that extends this scholarship into the frameworks offered by existing theory of children's literature.

There is immense scope to increase the breadth of knowledge of children's fiction within Native studies by considering the ways in which specific storytelling practices, memoir and tradition are incorporated into the growing subgenre of American Indian children's and young adult fiction and how this in turn relates to the broader field of pan-Indian literary scholarship. With the series' most recent publication being only the fifth in an estimated seven-book series, in some senses this study is incomplete and it is hoped that it will be built upon by further scholarship. The trajectory of the narrative indicates that Omakayas' story will conclude

on the Turtle Mountain reservation, the home of Erdrich's mother, which could continue the emphasis on land rights and homeliness into the allotment era (*Makoons*, the fifth book, takes place twenty-one years prior to the Dawes Act of 1887). The significance of these stories for the child reader is in some ways unknowable, but as the novels contribute to the wider field of children's literature they belong to a new wave of indigenous literature that celebrates Anishinaabe history and culture.

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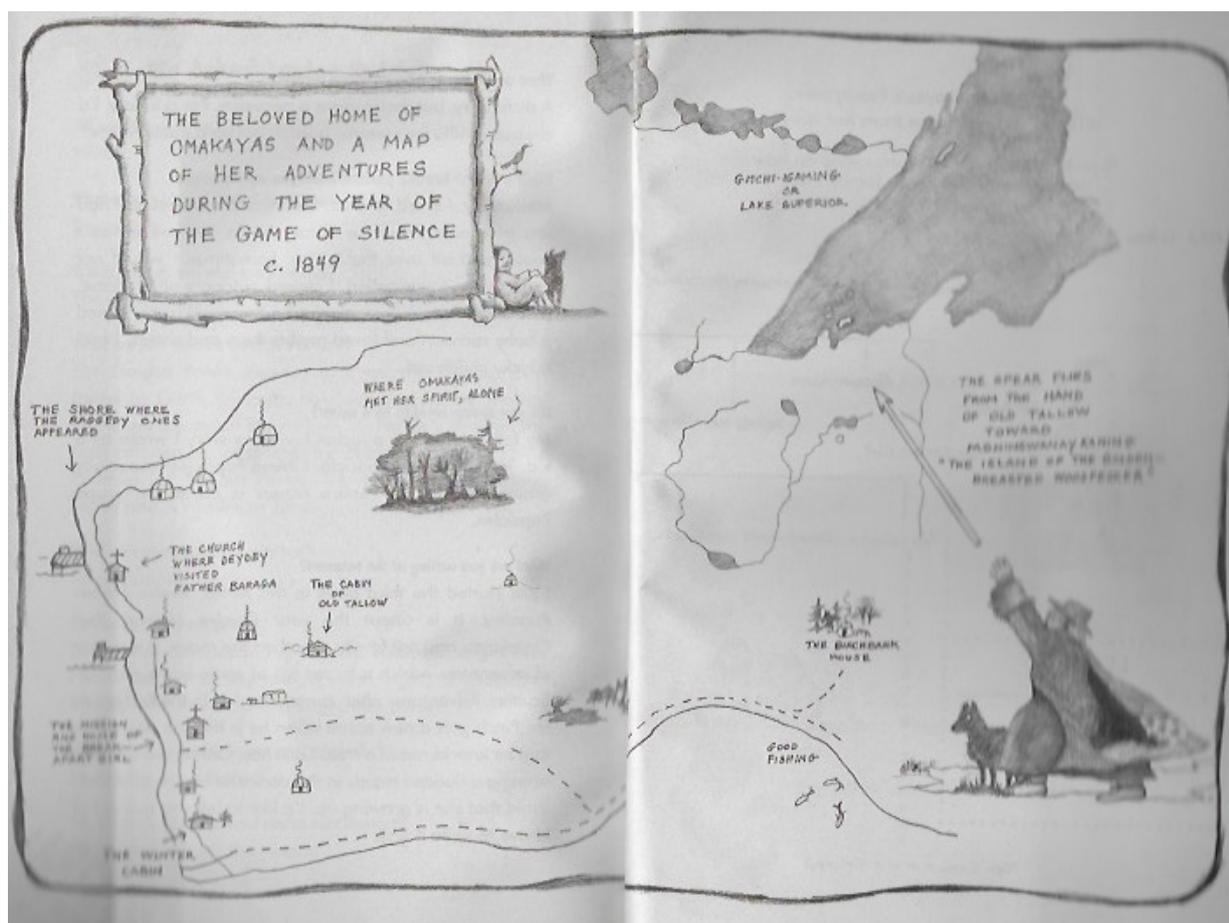


Fig 1. Map, *The Game of Silence*

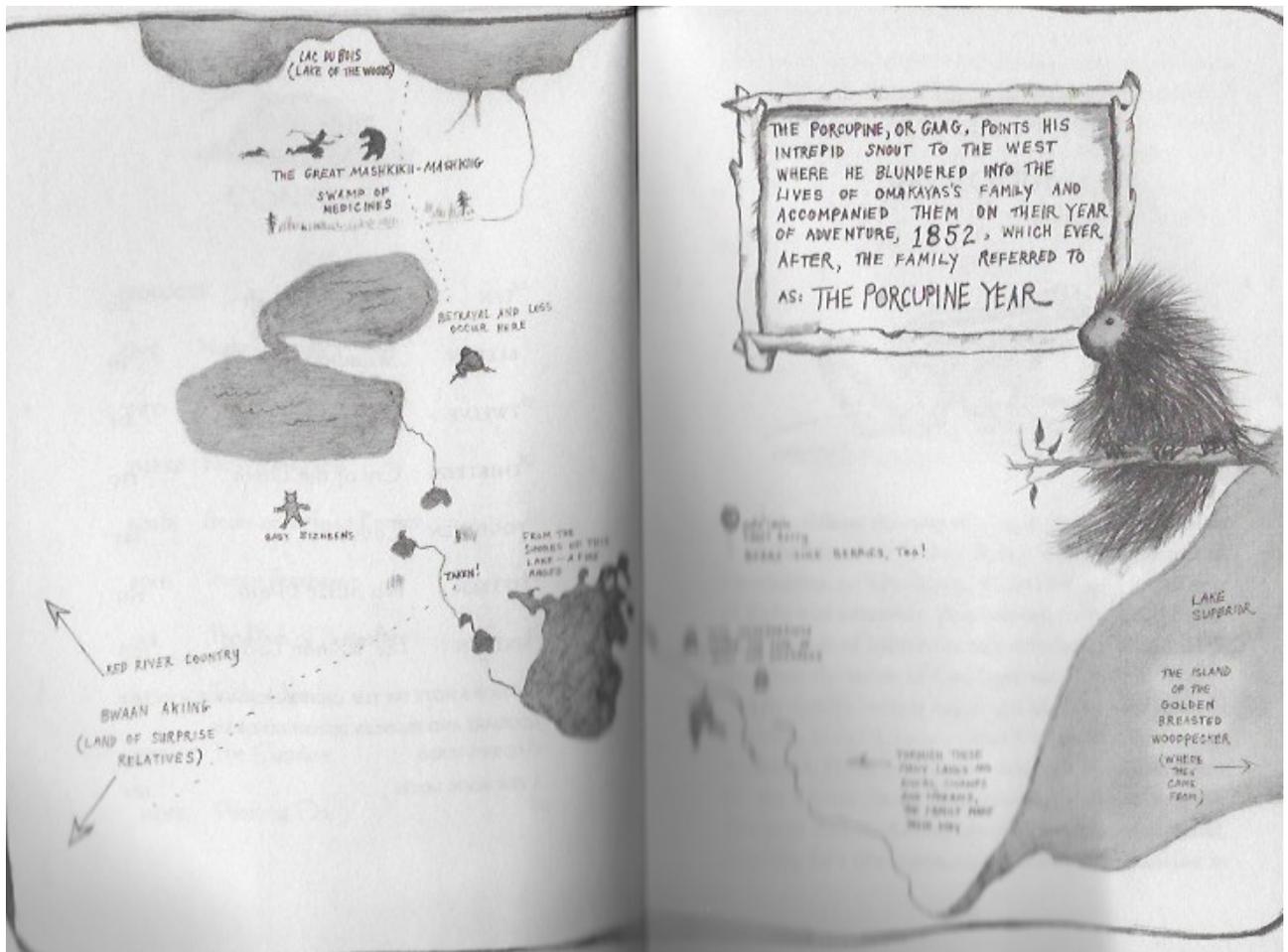


Fig 2. Map, *The Porcupine Year*

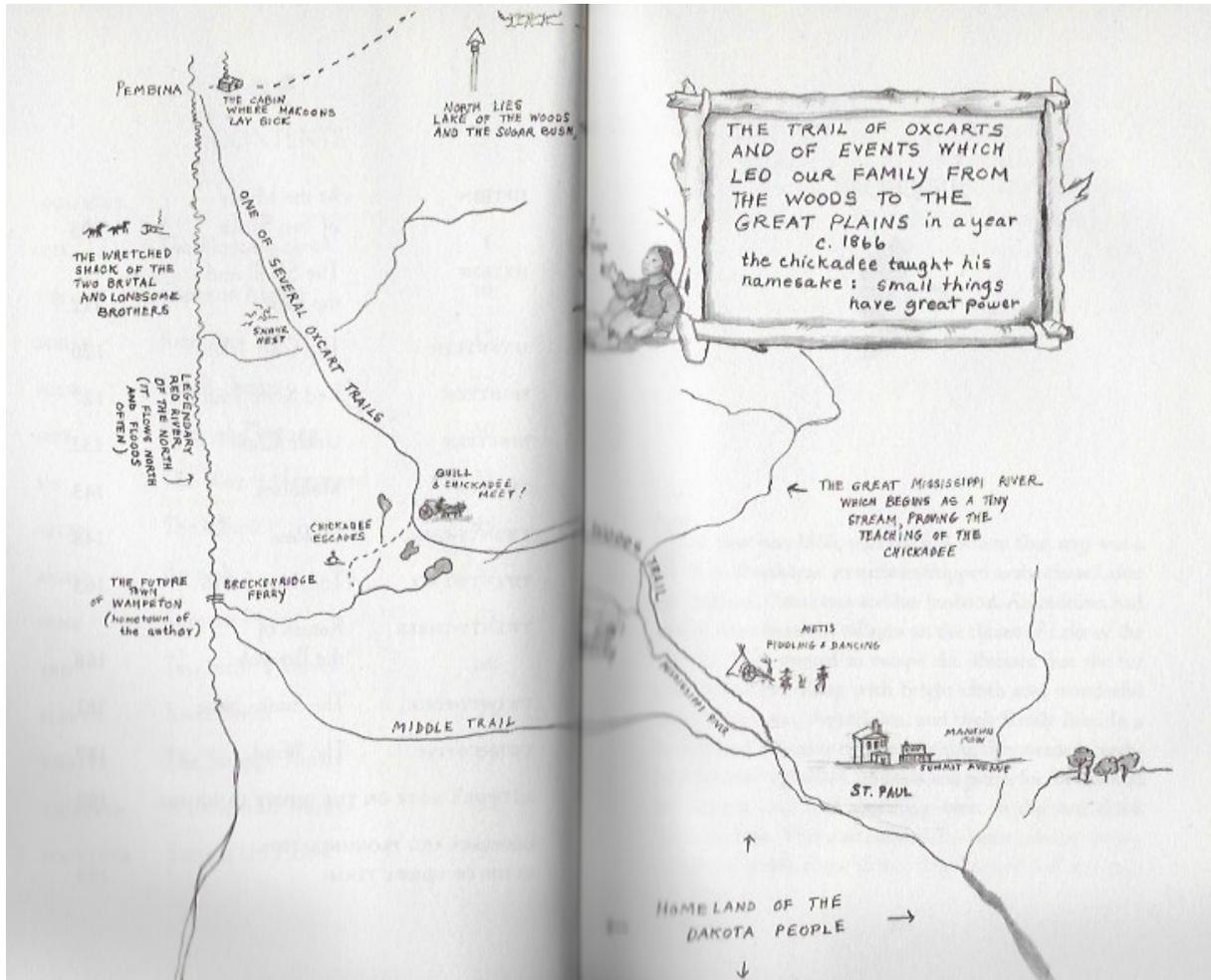


Fig 3. Map, *Chickadee*

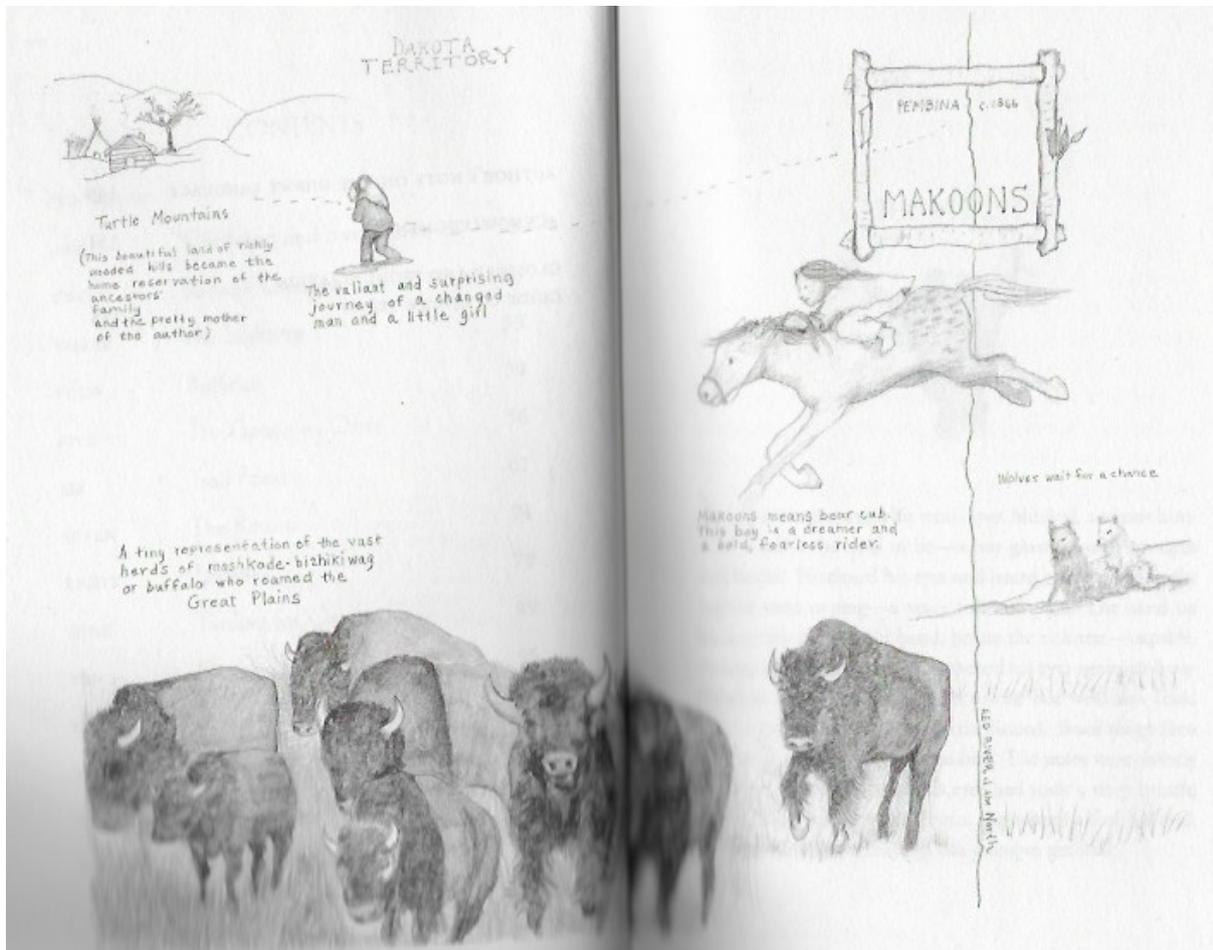


Fig 4. Map, *Makoons*