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RESEARCH ARTICLE

RETRIEVING FROM OBLIVION: ORAL TRADITION IN THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON
AND LOUISE ERDRICH

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ABSTRACT

The Native American and Afro-American culture has been preserved over centuries through the medium of oral literature. They employ oral tradition to preserve and maintain their cultural and individual identities. Storytelling is a survival tactic, a way to preserve and maintain identity. Morrison and Erdrich retrieve through oral tradition their lost identity, which is not only their personal identity but that of their whole people. The oral tradition is rooted in the ancient voices of the tribes, their stories, myths and rites. It is their wish to write it down, to not only record and preserve the memories but also the cultural tradition in a voice of story telling that brings back the old recollections in their novels. Erdrich's and Morrison's storytelling reconstructs and transmits the past and present tribulations. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* have registered the oral tradition in their novels for the benefit of both the listeners and the readers. The paper presents the pattern of ideas in which Morrison and Erdrich capture the form and purpose of oral story telling.

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INTRODUCTION

Stories in oral culture serve many purposes, like transmission of historical datas, the preservation of cultural values and ideas, the education and entertainment of children as well as adults. The knowledge transmitted is not static, however, though essential details may be retained. It is enriched and modified with every telling and by each different story teller. Oral literature is still propagated among the natives and the Afro-Americans as they play a major role in shaping the written literature. The oral literature of the Native American reflects the diversity of their religious beliefs, social structures, customs, and language and life styles. Native American oral literature was most often transmitted orally. However, some groups did record portions of their life styles using pictographic symbols. They preserved their medicine and rituals on birch bark scrolls and other materials. Native American oral literature includes both the works performed by the tribes within the communities that produced them and performances preserved in written transcriptions. In *Tracks*, Erdrich uses the Chippewa myth and lore in the portrayal of her characters. She brings in many legends and oral story telling to enhance them. In the novel Erdrich utilizes traces of animal folklore, evil forces, love medicines and Christianity in constructing her two female characters, Fleur and Pauline. Erdrich herself being partly a Chippewa and partly German, the writer's stories are set in an invented landscape called

River valley, a reservation town on the border of North Dakota and Minnesota, two states where she was raised. She attempts to present an oral discourse in a written format. Erdrich presents the individual characters as coexistent with tribal history and mythology. Fleur, the typical woman of the community in the novel is portrayed according to the native tradition as 'long-hair' or hold-out, as for the Indian nation. Erdrich has made use of animal folklore in *Tracks*. She represents Fleur as a 'bear' in this novel. The indication of bear according to Native mythology is similar to that of a conductor between the worlds. This infusion of the bear and power is introduced early in the story during the description of Fleur's as a spirited animal--the bear— a strong and more powerful member of her own clan is as follows:

Power travels in bloodlines, handed out before birth. It comes down through the hands, with the Pillagers (Fleur's clan) are strong and knotted, big, spidery and rough, with sensitive fingertips good out dealing cards. It comes through the eyes, too, belligerent, darkest brown, she eyes of those in the bear clan, impolite as they gaze directly at a person (Tracks 31)

Fleur's spirit is viewed as powers that are detrimental by her adverse Pauline. Pauline's distaste for Fleur is evident throughout the book. Pauline, the half-breed daughter of Chippewa and French Canadian ancestry, despises her Indian-ness, disowns her family and desperately wants to be white. Early in the novel, Pauline Puyat reveals her disdain for her Indian ancestry and her desire to establish herself as Canadian

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rather than Chippewa. Fleur on the other hand is hostile and rebellious toward colonization and gender roles. She dresses like a man and hunts like a bear. Erdrich no wonder had given Fleur an image of bear that is identical to non-colonized Native American spirit.

She [Fleur] messed with evil, laughed at the old women's went out, hunting, not even in her own body. We know for sure because the next morning, in the snow or dust, we followed the tracks of her bare feet and saw where they changed, where the claws sprang out, the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt. By night we heard her chuffing cough, the bear cough. (12)

Since storytelling in the Chippewa and the American traditions are Louise's birthrights, her works interweave characters and settings from folklores and animal myths. She also cycles in and out of various paradigms. *Tracks* also reveal the antithetical narrative of Pauline and Nanapush corresponding to the need of textual and oral history. Nanapush, one of the narrators is a nurturing figure in the tribal tradition. He is named after the trickster-transformer of aboriginal Chippewa myth as a vital character in the novel that upholds and spreads the ancient, living traditions. But Pauline, the other narrator is indeed a handful, representing all the pain, rage, and frustration of a person forced to live in two different cultures while being rejected to a large degree by both.

Nanapush narrates the story to Lulu, his grand-daughter, but Pauline addresses no one in particular thus implying not a listener but a reader. Erdrich points out here that written history, based on documents, is yet another kind of violence inflicted on oppressed peoples. Erdrich strongly advocates oral literature and employs in her novel the oral storytelling markers like the narrator not naming himself as he wouldn't in a traditional face-to-face story telling situation, nor the addressee named except to designate her relationship to the narrator (Grand-daughter). The rhetorical pattern employed in the novel is also typically associated with orality, repetitions with variation. "I guided", "I saw", "I trapped" used by Nanapush to describe his exploits is significant. There are several other oral markers signifying Erdrich's rejection of the language of documents. Nanapush is found referring to small pox or measles as "the spotted sickness". He also goes back in making use of the traditional names like Anishinabe rather than the anglicized textual one Chippewa. Similarly, he speaks of "a storm of government papers" instead of naming specific documents affecting the tribe.

Erdrich in *Tracks* makes use of oral history in narration. Because historical events caused intact tribes and bands like the Turtle Mountain Chippewa to become split at the root, Nanapush's and Pauline's point of view are both necessary to provide an "indigenous" account of what happens in *Tracks*. Erdrich's Native American characters inhabit a world irrevocably changed, a world in which they have been robbed of their land and resources, their culture and consequently their way of life. Through these characters and the lives of those around them, readers learn a history that cannot be found in

textbooks. Erdrich's novel *Tracks* thus focuses on oral history signaling the need for indigenous people to tell their own stories and their own histories. By telling their stories through the lives of ordinary people the novel works toward an understanding of history not as an objective narrative but as a story constructed of personal and ideological interests.

Morrison, like Erdrich equates her art with both music and storytelling. In an interview with Key Bonetti, Morrison talks about her works:

"I wanted ... like somebody was telling you a story. Yet you know it was nothing simple, as simple as that ... it was intricate ... I wanted the sound to be something I felt was spoken and more oral and less print"(Hall, Cheryl 1994).

Slave tales take up a significant percentage of the stories in oral circulation in black culture. *Beloved* is not the symbolic reproduction of a particular oral account but Morrison's awareness of the way tales circulate in an oral culture. Oral culture serves much purpose like transmission of historical data, the preservation of cultural values and ideas, the education and entertainment of children. The knowledge transmitted is not static, however, though essential details may be retained. It is enriched and modified with every narration and by each different story teller. Tales are told over and over again, as often as they are called for by the listeners, or as often as the actual or ceremonial need for their telling occurs. The story of Denver's birth serves different purposes for Sethe and Denver and *Beloved*, and is related by different tellers (Sethe and Denver) in ways designed to benefit both hearer and teller. Morrison's retrieval of oral/musical tradition is reflected in a variety of ways in her work, and her insistence upon the reader as "part of the creative process" is inevitably a link to the tradition. *Beloved* is experimented differently by different readers but with the understanding of oral tradition the novel engages us in harmony and accord with a memorable experience.

Black Americans were sustained, healed and nurtured by the translation of their experience into art and Morrison is not an exception to it. In visualizing the experience of the black Americans, Morrison's art sustains the American black community by various cultural traditions, including oral tradition from Africa. In African lore there are certain river spirits, seeming lunatics, believed to have contact with the unseen world. They are primarily identified by something strange about their hands and feet. The young woman who suddenly appears and assumes the title role in the novel has hands and feet with unnaturally smooth and soft skin that looks "new". She arrives by rising from a river. We are also allowed to see *Beloved* as reflecting her African past and the slave ship experience. In the end *Beloved* is shown as a woman running through the wood, looking as if she had "fish for hair". She was apparently aiming to return to the river from which she had first emerged. *Beloved* appears to be more like an African water spirit than an actual human being. Morrison here has portrayed *Beloved* as the "ghost" of slavery says Wendy

Harding in *A World of Difference* that has come to haunt both personal and historical memories.

In *Beloved* Morrison also uses the myth of the black community. She reinvigorates collective images in the experience of her people. She transfers black collective identity on images, stories and beliefs long forgotten. Her edition on *The Black Book* is conceived as "history as lived". *Beloved* is the progressive confluence of all the lost stories of the past as retold by a community of survivors. Morrison sets out to tell a series of stories that would add up to one encompassing story about her people. She employs with great success natural imagery, a bearer of the culture and history which she tries to pass on. Morrison is especially effective in using water and tree imagery. Water imagery becomes a metaphor for new life and with the idea of free life it is closely associated. Allusion to water is also made with the birth of Denver and the arrival of *Beloved*. Morrison uses tree imagery to signify shelters, companions, comforters and reminders of the past. In African religion it signifies the source of life and links it to the physical and spiritual worlds. Morrison uses it to connect the living with the dead and also physical with the spiritual.

Conclusion

For Sethe, we find trees have supplanted the memories of her lost children because it is less painful to remember than to recall her children. "try as she might... the sycamores beat out the children every time". (*Beloved* 6) To someone like Sethe whose racial memory hasn't been severed the tree helps to save her spiritual past while daunted by the spirits of the past. Toni Morrison's work can be compared to Louise Erdrich's mainly because of the "oral" quality of both writers. Both the writers have subverted and challenged the dominant written discourse through their narrative. Another point of comparison can be found in the fact that they both specialize in what Morrison calls "village literature" where the focus is on a particular people and their isolated places.

In Morrison's case the focus is on black people whereas in Erdrich's novel it is on native people who live in communities that haven't yet been swallowed up by urban sprawl. Both the women writers have tried to recreate by going back to the particular tradition that seems to have almost died out of their culture. The values and perceptions in the older and oral literatures underlie their writing. Story telling brings people together engaging them by recounting events worth remembering.

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