

## **Disease, Empire, and (Alter)Native Medicine in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* and Winona LaDuke's *Last Standing Woman***

Hsinya Huang

National Kaohsiung Normal University

### **Abstract**

This paper studies Native American disease/dis-ease in relation to Euramerican imperial expansion, taking it as the cutting edge of contemporary Native American literary representation of tribal history, memory, and culture. Disease becomes dis-ease, experienced and perceived in the tribal cultural context. While epidemics of pox and fever go hand in hand with governmental deprivation of tribal land and culture to inflict pain, disease also carries a potential salvation power. Native Americans seize hold of a memory of their ancient healing practices that are essential for their survival as the memory indeed flashes up at the moment of danger. Using Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988) and Winona LaDuke's *Last Standing Woman* (1998) as comparative texts, this paper takes on the complexity of the many interconnected facets of Native American experience of disease and healing.

### **Keywords**

disease, illness, epidemics, colonialism, medicine, Anishinabe

The Church had come to the Anishinaabeg in the early 1800s, bringing both the Bible and the smallpox.

—Winona LaDuke

We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall. [...] For those who survived the spotted sickness from the south, our long fight west to Nadouissieux land where we signed the treaty, and then a wind from the east, bringing exile in a storm of government papers [...].

—Louise Erdrich

This paper approaches the concept of disease/dis-ease in relation to Euro-American imperial expansion, taking disease/dis-ease as the cutting edge of contemporary Native American literary representations of tribal history, memory, and culture. Disease/dis-ease is treated as a composite, involving Native American traumatic history of alienation and outlandish experience in the home country, suppressed memory of the lost land, subversive desire for recovery and revival, and a tribal identity importantly defined by disease and its cure.<sup>1</sup> The discussion first pivots around the catastrophe caused by imperial expansion into the Americas: the causes and devastating effects of colonial disease. I argue that land usurpation and economic and spiritual deprivation by White colonization destroy Native harmony with Nature, accounting for tribal disease and illness, what the eminent Yale historian David Brion Davis considers “the greatest genocide in the history of man” (qtd. in Cowley 268). The paper focuses on how the Native disease/dis-ease is translated and worked through. Cut off from their lands of tradition and experiencing a trauma that constantly challenges identity, Native Americans are perpetually seeking to restore a scattered historical inheritance by retrieving and reviving their tribal memory of “medicine.” Consequently, while disease/dis-ease that results from the European imperial expansion causes anguish and dispossession, disease/dis-ease also carries a potential salvation power as the pain of disease/dis-ease instills the urge to search for a cure which is deeply rooted in their tribal tradition. To combat disease/dis-ease, Native Americans seize hold of a memory of their ancient healing practices that are essential for their survival as the memory indeed flashes up at the moment of danger. Using Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* (1988) and Winona LaDuke’s *Last Standing Woman* (1998) as comparative texts,<sup>2</sup> this paper takes on the complexity of the many interconnected

---

<sup>1</sup> For non-Natives, what is the preferred term for America’s indigenous peoples has been a source of some confusion. While the term “American Indian” or “Indian” originated from White invention upon the Discovery of the New World, to use the all-encompassing term “Native American” equally ignores the traditional self-definition of American indigenes as first and foremost tribal in identity (Weaver xiii). In this paper, I have consciously attended to the tribal designation, but still employ more technically accurate terms such as “Native American” or “indigenous” whereas non-Natives are referred to as “White” or “Euramerican,” which Louis Owens opts for (5).

<sup>2</sup> Part of my reading of *Tracks* was published in “Meizhou yuanzhumin nuxing shuxie zhong de zuqun yiliao: Erdrich, Silko, yu Anzaldúa zuopin li de nuxing yixue” (Tribal Healing in Native American Women’s Writings) in *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* 31.10 (2003): 149-92, while a small portion of the discussion on land usurpation in *Last Standing Woman* was presented in my paper titled “Writing Exile, Writing Trauma: Catastrophe, Memory, and Testimony in Winona LaDuke’s *Last Standing Woman*” at “The Poetics of Exile: An International Conference” held at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, on July 17-18, 2003. The comparative perspective in this current paper becomes the vantage point as well as the point of departure to investigate more thoroughly the Native

facets of Native American experience of disease and healing.

Both authors are Ojibwes<sup>3</sup>: Louise Erdrich, from the Turtle Mountain Band of the Chippewa, and Winona LaDuke, from the Makwa Dodaem (Bear Clan) of the Mississippi Band of the White Earth reservation. Both commence their works with colonial disease. Both are concerned with “dates,” tracing the tribal history of disease and land loss. Erdrich’s novel deals with the years between 1912 and 1926,<sup>4</sup> when the Ojibwes

---

disease and cure, a recurrent thematic concern in Native American literature. Erdrich is a productive writer. In addition to *Tracks*, she has published *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), *The Crown of Columbus* (with Michael Dorris, 1989), *The Bingo Palace* (1994), *Tale of Burning Love* (1996), *The Antelope’s Wife* (1998), and *The Last Report of the Miracles at Little No Horse: A Novel* (2002) to chronicle a changing tribal culture. *Tracks* and *Love Medicine* are an advantageous pairing, while *The Beet Queen* and *Tales of Burning Love* are intimately connected to each other. Her latest novel, *The Last Report*, is oriented to the voice of Father Damien Modeste, who has served the Ojibwe through a century of famine, epidemics, murders, and feuds. All these constitute Erdrich’s efforts of recovering a lost tribal heritage. In particular, *Tracks*, *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, *The Bingo Palace*, *Tale of Burning Love*, and *The Last Report* are engaged in constructing a communal history through generations in five Chippewa families. While *Tracks* is considered the first chronicle of this communal history, the exclusion of Erdrich’s books other than *Tracks* in this paper helps concentrate on the origin of the ills brought about by colonists to the tribe. In contrast to Erdrich’s productivity, LaDuke, a younger-generation Ojibwe, has published only one novel in addition to ecological essay collections. Nonetheless, Erdrich highly praises LaDuke’s debut into creative writing by saying “this book goes out into the world much as a prayer. Reading it, I am blessed by the writer’s use of language and strengthened by her courageous vision” (*Last Standing Woman*, front cover). LaDuke’s *Last Standing Woman* and Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* are prominent examples of the writings that deal with Anishinabe land loss. While in *Tracks*, the Chippewas lose their trees as the ancient magic power is diminishing, LaDuke dramatizes the White-Red confrontation in land via the well-designed and orchestrated “Standoff at White Earth” to prevent lumber men from cutting more trees. Even so, the Anishinabes are indeed forced from their woodland reservation and driven into the civilized West where the Whites threaten to exterminate them. Anishinabe land loss thus results in a chaotic and grotesque world of violence and conflict, which Gerald Vizenor has earlier portrayed in his *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978). Not all Native American tribes, however, have been completely exiled from their homelands: the Pueblos and the Navajo are strong examples. They too have experienced degradation of their land, though—uranium mining at Acoma, for instance, is familiar to readers of Native American literature from Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977). Consequently, the Navajo and the Pueblos have also lost their sacred land spirits even as they have maintained control of villages and homesteads.

<sup>3</sup> Ojibwe, Chippewa, and Anishnabe are the orthographic variations of the name for the same woodland tribal culture in Minnesota and Dakota. According to William Brandon in his *The Last Americans*, the Ojibwe made up one of the largest nations north of Mexico. The last syllable of Ojibwe is pronounced “way.” The name refers to the peculiar puckered seam of Native moccasins. European colonists garbled it into Chippeway and stuck to it so persistently that many Ojibwes call themselves Chippewa. But some Ojibwes today prefer another even more ancient name for themselves, Anishnabe, meaning “we people,” “original and primitive tribes” (qtd. in Allen, *Grandmothers of the Light* 208). While LaDuke uses “Anishinabe” consistently throughout her novel, Erdrich uses the three variations interchangeably not only to identify the ancient tradition but to disclose the political reality of the Turtle Band of the Chippewa (Stookey 9-11).

<sup>4</sup> The framing dates of 1912 and 1926 are significant. 1912 is the year when the land could be sold after 25 years of the enactment of the Allotment policy; 1924 is the year Indians were granted US citizenship, a right that was and continues to be controversial among tribal communities. Native

were coping with the effects of the epidemics alongside the General Allotment Act of 1887, which had divided tribal communal land into individual units later contributing to part of the transformation of Indian land into Euramerican property—the allotment thereby reducing the total acres of Indian land by 65 percent (qtd. in Larson 1). LaDuke's story of *Last Standing Woman* begins in an even more remote past, in 1862, and extends her tribal vision into the future to the year 2018. In chronicling more than a hundred years of conflicts between cultures and peoples, and the imposition of a violent system of governance and legal campaign, LaDuke in effect provides a paradigm to bare the roots of five hundred years of American history since 1492. A strong pining for the recovery and revival of their common cultural inheritance permeates both texts. But LaDuke, a younger-generation Ojibwe, picks up where Erdrich has left off, extending the tribal vision both historically and geographically, and responding more positively to the ills as earlier disclosed in *Tracks*. LaDuke is scientific and accurate in dates and places, representing tribal milieu in its historical and geographical specificities, whereas Erdrich is imaginative, inscribing tribal landscape into a magic world of human and non-human spirits. Both authors, nonetheless, open their texts with the history of their people, using such a history as an indicator of what Elizabeth Cook-Lynn among others identifies as “tribal voice.” Erdrich traces the communal history of combat against imperial invasion in remembering loss of their treasured woods, while LaDuke tells of the ancient Anishinabe woodlands and waterways, which were earlier lost to European colonizers and capitalists but finally regained

The actual physical “diseases” that I deal with in this paper are the epidemics of “feverish diseases” brought by European conquest and colonization: flu, smallpox, pneumonia, tuberculosis, and the like. When Columbus first “discovered” the Americas, all these diseases were indeed a prominent feature of the “Columbian exchange,” which resulted in the collapse of the Native American Empire as well as the death of millions of Native Americans. The symbolic “dis-ease” is the spiritual devastation and historical trauma of the Native American holocaust. The colonial invasion and oppression result not merely in the epidemics but also in the devastating drought of Native American spirituality. Nevertheless, the disease/dis-ease regenerates the tribal healing that would otherwise be consigned to oblivion by colonial White medical supremacy. This paper is therefore double-edged. Drawing upon Erdrich's and

---

Americans have since faced taxes and forfeiture of their land to lumber companies (Friedman 128, n.4).

LaDuke's novels, I employ "disease/dis-ease" as a legitimate approach not only to a critique of European colonization but also to a revival of Native American cultural heritage and resistance. Disease ensures a potential salvation power.

The distinction between disease and dis-ease is one between two widely acknowledged terms in the study of medical anthropology: disease and illness. While in the Western world, scholars take the two interchangeably, disease and illness in some non-Western cultures represent different health problems: "disease" is an objectively measurable pathological condition of the body. In contrast, illness is a feeling of not being normal or comfortable. Illness may be due to a disease, but more likely to a feeling of psychological or spiritual imbalance. To illustrate, the Western medical tradition, which had its root in ancient Greece, especially with the ideas of Hippocrates in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C., relies heavily on a naturalistic explanation of illness. This explanation assumes that disease is due to such impersonal and mechanistic causes as organic deterioration, obstruction, injury, malnutrition, and/or germs. Disease is fundamentally interpreted in terms of bodily symptoms and can thus be potentially understood and cured by the application of scientific methods to remove the ailment causes from the body.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, "illness" is highly culture-related and can only be experienced and perceived in its cultural context. For medical anthropologists, a culture's perceptions of disease uncover the major aspects of its tradition and world view. Specifically, for Native Americans, illness results from a spiritual disorder. A flow chart of the sacred etiology of illness would reveal the pattern: spiritual disorder to cosmic reflection of the disorder to etheric or "energy" body to physical body. The illness of the physical body is merely a shadow of an even deeper disharmony in spirit. It is the loss of harmony, an inner-world imbalance that reveals itself in a physical or psychological ailment. Native Americans consider all beings in an interconnected network. While balance and harmony are fundamental laws of the cosmos, natives suffer from illness due to violation of this spiritual law (taboo) (Allen, *Grandmothers of the Light* 168). The entire state of disharmony nation- or world-wide likely works its way out in disease, hence debilitating and devastating illness sweeping through the population. Causes and cures of illness are not to be found only in the natural world. Native

---

<sup>5</sup> Concerning the evolution of disease theories in the Western medical science, please refer to Worboys. For a broad overview of the way medicine is experienced, perceived and socially constructed in Western societies and an understanding of the socio-cultural dimensions of disease and illness, refer to Lupton.

Americans often attribute the disease to supernatural agency. To get a diagnosis and cure, the ailing spirit needs to be reconnected with universal harmony. Native Americans resort to shamanistic treatments by divination, prayer, meditation, charms, incarnations, ceremonies, dances, and the beating of drums to restore order to the disturbed cosmos.

Consequently, medicine in its tribal context is regarded as at once a religion and a way of life, in effect, a locus where the divine meets with the arcane. In *Two Cultures Meet: Pathways for American Indians to Medicine*, Ojibwe critic Larry Aitken remarks that while the West fragments discrete disciplines, Native American medicine is an interdisciplinary network of religion, philosophy, spirituality, health care, psychology, ecology, and natural history. It is furthermore a way of life. As such, the physical and the spiritual, the natural and the supernatural, are connected while they still are only a part of the larger main source or matrix, which originates from a spiritual sense of reaching out like a “web” and connecting everything. Aggressive actions against nature, toward plant and animal communities, eventually result in illness as those actions turn the cosmos against human health and life.

To interpret Native American disease, therefore, one cannot ignore the impact of imperial expansion on the harmony and order of the land which tribal people have inhabited for ages. Recently, in fact, distinguished post-colonial STS (Science and Technology Studies) scholars and medical historians have recognized the significance of the association among disease, medicine and imperial expansion, starting with Fanon’s early post-colonial analysis which concentrated on the connection between medical practices and imperialism.<sup>6</sup> Noble David Cook works on disease in relation to the American conquest while Sheldon Watts singles out disease, power, and imperialism as the key words needed to understand post-colonial history. Warwick Anderson furthermore endeavors to inquire into the possibility of the post-colonial history of medicine, drawing upon his study on disease, race, and empire. Specifically, before Columbus’s fateful Discovery in 1492, none of such epidemic diseases as smallpox, cholera, malaria, yellow fever, tuberculosis, and venereal syphilis existed in the New World. After contact, epidemic diseases killed millions of Native Americans who had yet no occasion or need to develop immunities. Diseases alongside the White imperial greed consequently amounted to what historians call “the holocaust” of the New World.

---

<sup>6</sup> For details, please refer to Fanon.

Concerning the New World holocaust, statistics show that by the middle of the eighteenth century, the population of Native Americans had plummeted from the estimated seventy-five to one hundred million of pre-conquest days to a mere two hundred and fifty thousand. This has been called “the worst human holocaust the world had ever witnessed,” by the historians of the New World discovery (qtd. in Arnold 78).<sup>7</sup> One of the explanations for this rapid decline of the native population would be the imperial brutality in Euro-Indian wars. But doubts are raised as to the capacity of the comparatively small number of colonizers to triumph over vastly greater numbers of Native Americans. Alfred W. Crosby therefore focuses on an expansive account of the biological dynamics behind European expansionism. In his *Ecological Imperialism* as well as *The Columbian Exchange*, Crosby identifies disease as the cutting edge of European imperialism and argues that Europe’s relations with the New World were determined by factors over which Europeans had little conscious control and hence no moral responsibility. “It was their germs,” Crosby states, “not these imperialists themselves, for all their brutality and callousness, that were chiefly responsible for sweeping aside the indigenes and opening the Neo-Europes to demographic takeover” (qtd. in Arnold 88).<sup>8</sup> In arguing against imperial brutality as a possible cause for demographic collapse, Crosby remarks that before European exploitation had time to eliminate natives, smallpox and other diseases intervened to destroy Native Americans’ health.

Crosby’s idea is in effect a biological fallacy, ascribing the Native American holocaust to geo-biological factors. Reasoning in a Darwinian fashion, Crosby among others tends to see the life of Native Americans after their contact with Europe as a matter of the survival of the fittest. That the indigenous population was hunted down, according to Crosby’s logic, was the dire consequence of their biological vulnerability. The aboriginal demographic collapse is thus attributed to the deadly potency of epi-

---

<sup>7</sup> Originally from David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (1992) 146.

<sup>8</sup> Originally from Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (1986) 196. In *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (1972), Crosby’s main focus is also the traffic of diseases to the New World as the dominant incident of the “Columbian Exchange.” Crosby is not the only scholar who argues the destructive power of the epidemics in America. Among others, Arnold also quotes William H. McNeill’s *Plagues and Peoples* (1979), Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (1992), and Donald Joralemon’s “New World Depopulation and the Case of Disease” (1982). All these add up to address the concept of “global unification by disease,” as first put forth, according to Arnold, by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie in his “A Concept: The Unification of the Globe by Disease,” included in *The Mind and Method of the Historian* (1981).

demic disease widely spread in the Americas after contact. As McNeill concludes his investigation of Native American plagues, “[t]he main destructive role was certainly played by epidemic disease” (McNeill 192; qtd. in Arnold 79).

Nonetheless, while the impact of epidemic outbreak cannot be overstated, imperial exploitation indeed operated with disease to bring wholesale death and destruction to the native peoples. Precisely, where it is accepted that disease might be the immediate cause of mortality, as David Arnold contends, the ultimate responsibility rested with human or rather inhuman action—the rapacity of colonists and their contempt for native tribal civilization. It is, according to David E. Stannard, “purposeful genocide” (Stannard xli; qtd. in Arnold 85). Whereas Europe had the opportunity to recover from the onslaught of the Black Death in the fourteenth century, the Americas upon “Discovery” were confronted simultaneously by both human and microbial invasion. In the Americas, the loss of land, the destruction of social and belief systems and the impacts of conquest and colonization associated with native land loss had prevented native demographics from recovery for centuries, by which time European power was firmly entrenched. The New World holocaust was therefore not solely a bio-microbial accident, the unintended consequence of epidemics and microbial invasion. Rather, it was also the outcome of colonial racial contempt, brutal capitalistic policies, and European lust for land and wealth (Arnold 85).

Precisely, the catastrophe commenced with European expansionist lust. The Americas became Europe’s great frontiers, “a vast body of wealth without proprietors,” an “empty land,” several times the size of Europe, a land “whose resources had not yet been exploited” (qtd. in Arnold 110).<sup>9</sup> This frontier thesis condemned Native Americans as “savage races” doomed to an inevitable extinction, and native land as “virgin soil” awaiting “the transforming hand of the European” (qtd. in Arnold 113).<sup>10</sup> Forests were felled and wild animals killed for colonial economic benefits, and land cultivated to emancipate gold and silver, and new foods for unsatisfied bellies—all these subsequent changes in the Americas should be measured against the benchmark of native land loss. Overlooking the Native legacy in the American landscape, Western pioneers were blind to Native American history and culture. We should thus view the destruction of natives’ living environments as catastrophe, the true cause of indigenous disaster.

---

<sup>9</sup> Originally from Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Frontier* (1964) 7-9.

<sup>10</sup> Originally from Michael Williams, *Americans and Their Forests: A Historical Geography* (1989) 49.

LaDuke in her interview with David Barsamian underscores environmental threats faced by native communities, as she launches a scathing attack on not only earlier frontier exploitation but also more contemporary ecological catastrophe: two-thirds of the uranium resources in the country, one-third of all Western low-sulfur coal, and the single largest hydroelectric project are on Indian lands. The federal government furthermore has nuclear waste dump proposals for reservations. To come to terms with the fact that this colonial country is indeed running out of frontiers, the White government sacrifices not merely Indian benefits but the relationship of humans to the natural world. The result is the disappearance of indigenous peoples and species over the last 500 years since contact, which LaDuke in her prose writing, *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (1999), characterizes as “a great holocaust” (1). Native illness emerges out of environmental catastrophe.

Both Erdrich and LaDuke inscribe environmental catastrophe into their chronicles of conflicts and resistance. Erdrich’s *Tracks* deals with the aftermath of the General Allotment Act, while LaDuke initiates her *Last Standing Woman* with the account of “a series of twenty or so treaties by the 1860’s” (24). Both concern the “government papers” through which the Whites stole the Anishinabe land. Noticeably, the allotment set out to convert the Chippewa from a communal hunting and gathering organization to a capitalistic agricultural economy, aiming at assimilating the tribal people into the White way of life, to become productive capitalists and to assume the responsibilities of paying the tax. But it ended up with forfeiture of their land to the White government. *Tracks* dramatizes the tribal land loss. Over the course of ten crucial years when tribal land was ceaselessly diminished by imperial expansion, Erdrich locates her narrative tension in how her tribal men and women endured the White men’s venality in the form of official papers and legal documents: “our long fight west to Nadouissieux land where we signed the treaty, and then a wind from the east, bringing exile in a storm of government papers, what descended from the north in 1912 seemed impossible” (1). In this respect, LaDuke pushes the subject of land loss further by enumerating the states, rivers, lakes, and numbers of acres as evidence. LaDuke “maps” the lost tribal properties:

The Dakota had lost over thirty million acres of Iowa, Minnesota, and the Dakota Territory due to the treaties and papers which they didn’t understand. They had retained only a “reservation” ten miles wide and one hundred and fifty miles long bordering the Minnesota River. (29)

The government would terminate the Anishinaabeg reservations of Gull Lake, Sandy Lanke, Pokegama, Oak Point, and others because of the Dakota's Little Crow's War with the government and Bugonaygeeshig's raiding the white men as revenge for white men's invasion and cheating. (32)

LaDuke is accurate in numbers and sites, laying out historical and geographical realities that have been hidden and consigned to oblivion by White historians. In contrast, Erdrich approaches a similar subject in a completely different fashion, at once imaginative and compelling, rich in its indomitable vigor and vitality. Near the end of her novel, as White lumber crews press into the woods, the tribal calamity is envisaged through the visionary power of the shaman woman Fleur:

[...] a forest was suspended, lightly held. The fingered lobes of leaves floated on nothing. The powerful throats, the columns of trunks and splayed twigs, all substance was illusion. Nothing was solid. Each green crown was held in the air by no more than splinters of bark. Each tree was sawed through at the base. (223)

The forest seems to be instilled with a power of its own, undertaking a suicidal destruction as the trees crash down all by themselves to frighten the lumber men away. *Tracks* pronounces the catastrophic power in supernatural associations with Fleur.

Fleur is a liminal figure, mediating between the human and non-human world. Animal spirits "all through the woods [speak] through" her (59). Her screams at giving birth to Lulu summon the bear, the tribal totem animal, to protect and heal.<sup>11</sup> By the moment that the woods are "leveled to the lake and to the road" (223), animal spirits are gathered around Fleur's cabin as we learn from Nanapush: "the moment I entered, I heard the hum of a thousand conversations. Not only the birds and small animals, but the spirits in the western stands had been forced together" (220).<sup>12</sup> Through the agency

---

<sup>11</sup> We should consider the bear as Fleur's guardian Manitou as she comes from the bear clan. The other guardian Manitou of Fleur's would be Misshepesu, the water Manitou, who dwells in the lake by Fleur's cabin and is rumored to have coupled with her and begot Lulu. Misshepesu is portrayed as pure, "with a mouth as tender as a child's" (11). A detailed discussion on Manitou in relation to tribal etiology will come later in this paper.

<sup>12</sup> For details concerning the magic world centering on Fleur, consult *Juan*, Chapter V.

of Fleur, Erdrich underscores the significance of the Anishinabe spirituality as she represents the catastrophe of its loss upon imperial invasion.

*Tracks* dramatizes the devastation of colonial diseases as it recounts the tribal land loss. Disease becomes dis-ease, experienced and perceived in the context of tribal environmental catastrophe. The symptoms of the physical body are the acting-out of the disharmony in spirit. It is the loss of harmony, an inner-world imbalance that reveals itself in physical or psychological ailment. While Native Americans tie all beings into an interconnected network, the disturbance in cosmic harmony works its way out in disease. Medical research indeed shows that the Chippewa were afflicted with outbreaks of smallpox from 1869 to 1870 and of tuberculosis from 1891 to 1901 (Peterson 985). Epidemics and government papers of various acts and treaties are singled out as related incidents in the narrative of Nanapush, the Ojibwe medicine man. In his account, Erdrich manages to subvert the official History, which regards imperial expansion as “progress,” by showing how that “progress” has caused the tribe’s irreversible loss.

*Tracks* commences with the onslaughts of epidemics of smallpox and tuberculosis that had swept through Indian communities since the Discovery in 1492. The first chapter narrated by the old medicine man Nanapush opens as the tribe recovered from a devastating smallpox epidemic that was followed in turn by the “consumption”:

We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall. [...] For those who survived the *spotted sickness* from the south, our long fight west to Nadouissioux land where we signed *the treaty*, and then a wind from the east, bringing exile in a storm of *government papers*. [...] By then [1912], we thought disaster must surely have spent its force, *that disease* must have claimed all of the Anishinabe that the earth could hold and bury. But the earth is limitless and so is luck and so were our people once. [...] *A new sickness* swept down. [...] *The consumption*. [...] *This disease* was different from the *pox* and *fever*, for it came on *slow*. The outcome, however, was just as certain. (1-2; emphases added)

“Diseases” and “treaties” run alternately, or rather “hand in hand,” in Nanapush’s narrative to constitute a stark picture of the tribal plight. Concerning disease, Nanapush’s story corresponds to the historical accounts that colonial medical historian Crosby makes about how European diseases have been more deadly to native popu-

lations across the country than Red-White warfare: “It was their germs,” rather than their guns, that are responsible for Indian demographic decline—as Crosby points out, disease wiped out up to 50 percent of Native Americans while warfare killed only an estimated 10 percent.<sup>13</sup>

But Nanapush moves beyond these historical documentaries which do not fully acknowledge the horror of Native genocide. First, Nanapush nominates “treaties” and “government papers” to show that Native Americans were in effect confronted simultaneously by both human and microbial invasion. The impacts of “government papers” associated with native land loss indeed prevented demographic recovery from deadly disease, by which time European power had taken over “the frontier,” leaving tribal people nothing to rely on for survival. Furthermore, by shifting the pronouns at the outset of the story from “we” (the people) in the first paragraph to “I” (the only surviving witness) in the third paragraph and after, Nanapush specifically marks the horror of the genocide—rather than 50 percent of Native population, Nanapush articulates this horror by repeatedly pronouncing “the last”:

*I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver. [...] I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake. I axed the last birch that was older than I, and I saved the last Pillager. (2; emphases added)*

In this, Erdrich discloses the limits of historical documentaries and makes up for its lack by supplying the testimony from the “last” tribal surviving witness. While Nanapush relates the past events to Lulu, he in effect bypasses the official markers of things: he refers to “the spotted sickness” instead of smallpox, and to “a new sickness,” “invisible sickness,” and “slow” disease rather than tuberculosis or what it is called by Father Damien, “the consumption.”<sup>14</sup> He uses traditional tribal names of Anishinabe and Nadouissiooux rather than Anglicized ones like Chippewa and Sioux; he refers to

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 8.

<sup>14</sup> The “consumption” was the nineteenth-century Western medical term for tuberculosis, whose symptoms included fever, coldness and loss of appetite, and a breaking down of normal lung tissues causing the lungs to be drowned in fluid. In his account of the disease, Nanapush, like a modern doctor, is capable of detailing the pathological development of “the invisible sickness”: “we were filled with the water of the drowned. [...] Then the slivers of ice began to collect and cover us. [...] We needed no food. And little warmth. [...] I learned later that this was common, that there were many of our people who died in this manner, of the invisible sickness” (6).

“government papers” without ever naming any specific documents, ignoring any official designation. In all this, as Peterson insightfully pinpoints, Erdrich insists on the need for the tribal people “to tell their stories and their own histories” (985) even as they are endangered by disease. It is an act of empowerment, central to tribal survival.

Consequently, the epidemic becomes the pivotal moment that ties Nanapush to Fleur. He rescues Fleur at the moment of danger when White medical officials issue a quarantine to burn down her house for she has contracted “the consumption.” To eliminate the germs that cause the disease, Western sanitary professionals symbolically aim at destroying Fleur, the representative figure of tribal medicine inheritance: Fleur, the last Pillager, is said to be in charge of the “half-forgotten medicines,” “ways we shouldn’t talk about” (12). By rescuing Fleur, Nanapush saves tribal medicine.

Nanapush retains the tribal ways while he is as capable of diagnosing and detailing the ailment and its symptoms like a Western doctor.<sup>15</sup> When “the consumption” swept Europe in the nineteenth century, Western doctors followed germ theory,<sup>16</sup> thinking of the disease as spread by germs. Nanapush, nonetheless, recognizes “the invisible sickness” as the effect of “windigo,” the embodiment of evil spirits (qtd. in Clarke 38).<sup>17</sup> For Nanapush, diseases spread across species, not in the Western medical sense of viral species-jump but in the tribal definition of illness as disturbance across different cosmic realms, i.e., the sky, the earth, and the underworld. As the cosmos is governed by various Manitous, “the power beings on whom Chippewan personal lives depend” (qtd. in McCafferty 731), Manitou then links the Anishnabe with other beings, connecting them in harmonious rhythms. There is an interactive flow of relationships between humans, animals, clan guardian spirits, spirits of the land, the dead, and the sacred. While Native Americans tie all beings into an interconnected web, the disturbance in cosmic harmony due to imperial invasion works its way out in disease, hence debilitating and devastating illness sweeping through the population. So

---

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 14.

<sup>16</sup> Refer to footnote 5.

<sup>17</sup> Helen Jaskoski explains that in traditional Chippewa tales, “*Windigo* is a giant, a skeleton of ice, the embodiment of winter starvation, a cannibal who can devour whole villages. *Windigo* sickness occurs when this dangerous spirit takes possession of a human soul, causing an irresistible desire to consume human flesh. Individuals subject to such possession show signs of their vulnerability in greedy gluttony, especially an insatiable appetite for fat and grease. [...] Sometimes the monster itself is not killed but returns to natural human life after being relieved of its icy carapace; in the same way, a person afflicted with *windigo* psychosis might return to normal after melting or losing the heart of ice.” Originally from Jaskoski, “From the Time Immemorial: Native American Traditions in Contemporary Short Fiction,” in *Since Flannery O’Conner: Essays on the Contemporary Short Story* (1987) 54-71; qtd. in Clarke.

as Nanapush observes, “by night we heard her [Fleur] chuffing cough, the bear cough” (12).

Nanapush is the sole survivor from his family line, destined to rescue Fleur, again a solitary figure with all her family having died “in the last scourge of sickness” (6). He is in effect representative of the spirit of the old medical tradition, Midewiwin, or Medicine Lodge Society, the main section of the Chippewa medical practice in its participation in what the White would define as “supernatural” powers.<sup>18</sup> He rescues Fleur from the “invisible sickness” by chants and keeps her awake and away from death by stories. Meanwhile, he cures Moses from his feverish disease by giving him “a new name to fool death, a white name” (35). Once in Fleur’s little cabin, he makes Father Damien listen to his talking all night only to “[push] him under with [his] words” (7). He shapeshifts to guide Eli on his hunt, and draws upon powerful songs to heal a burnt child back to health. He practices traditional herbal medicine, saving Lulu’s legs from amputation. Most significantly, at the time when epidemic diseases devastate, he tells stories to save not only Fleur’s life but his own: “During the year of sickness, when I was the last one left, I saved myself by starting a story. [...] I could hardly keep moving my lips. But I did continue and recovered. I got well by talking. Death could not get a word in edgewise, grew discouraged, and traveled on” (46). In one example of how the Ojibwe survives the epidemic adversity, Ignatia Broker recounts that the coughing disease had two effects as it swept through the tribe: it killed, but it also motivated the Ojibwe to “practice the herb healing in secret. The will of the Ojibwe was one again, and the tie to the old ways was strengthened” (qtd. in McCafferty 249).<sup>19</sup> The epidemic is the pivotal moment, as pinpointed earlier, when Nanapush redeems old medicine ways through story-telling.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> There are three formal avenues of medical practice in the Chippewa tradition: those of the Midewiwin, the Je’sako, and the Wa’bano. While both the Midewiwin and the Je’sako’s rites are organized around the intent to create, maintain, or restore harmony and health, there is a third option to keep with the Chippewa dynamic of continuous interaction between good and evil. The Wa’bano with its cannibalistic rites counter-acts the restorative power of both the Midewiwin and the Je’sako—the Wa’bano is the power to enchant and kill. For details, refer to Aitken and McCafferty. In fact, the Ojibwe alongside the Pueblo of the southwest extols the symbiosis of the positive and negative force. The necessity of this symbiosis is evident also in the Yellow Woman story among the Keres interpreted by Allen in her “Kochinenako in Academe,” in *The Sacred Hoop* 222-44.

<sup>19</sup> Originally from Ignatia Broker, *Night Flying Woman* (1990) 87.

<sup>20</sup> Nanapush practices tribal medicine in various ways. In addition to chants and stories, he puts a treasure of medicine bags under his bed, and frequently calls upon ancestral spirits to help through drumming. Though the Pillagers are the owner of the drum, it is Nanapush who stores the drum in its sacred wrappings. In tribal medicine, drumming is used to alter consciousness in order to enter the spirit world. As the drum is beaten, it vibrates in resonance with the rhythms of the body. The medicine man

Fleur participates in tribal medicine, too, for she knows “the secret ways to cure or kill” (2). Sarvé-Gorham employs the concept of “the four orders of the Midewiwin” to approach Fleur’s tribal spirituality:

According to Basil Johnson’s description of the four orders of the Midewiwin, a novice Midewequae, or medicine woman, spends the first year learning herbal lore before induction into the first order. Attaining the second order yields the abilities to “see far, even beyond the scope of sight,” to “hear matters beyond the range of hearing,” and to “touch and sense” good and evil. Initiation into the third order involves communion with the incorporeal world, learning to “summon supernatural powers and beings, cause vibrations in things,” to acquire skills in weather control, and to “extract hidden things and meanings.” After a fourth year of study, a medicine woman becomes qualified to instruct and to initiate apprentices into the society. (qtd. in Sarvé-Gorham 171-72)

Though Sarvé-Gorham’s approach is legitimate, Fleur’s power specifically resides in what Paula Gunn Allen terms as “the way of the mother.”<sup>21</sup> During her delivery of Lulu, Fleur exemplifies the spirit of tribal healing—the interconnectedness of the cosmic web—in her way of being a mother. At her labor, “it is as if the Manitous all through the woods spoke through Fleur, loose, arguing: Turtle’s quavering scratch, the Eagle’s high shriek, Loon’s crazy bitterness, Otter, the howl of Wolf, Bear’s low rasp” (59). The bear is summoned to come into the birth house. Fleur is soon filled with such power that she raises herself on the mound of blankets and gives birth. Fleur does not open her eyes until Margaret saves her by packing wormwood and moss between her legs, wrapping her in blankets heated with stones, then kneading Fleur’s stomach and forcing her to drink cup after cup of boiled raspberry leaf until at last Fleur groans, draws the baby against her breast, and again lives (60). Herbs are used to lend their spirit and power to the humans. The power of herbs is to heal, to attract good spirit,

---

listens to the vibrations of the drum as a form of diagnosis. Drumming also helps to rebalance internal areas by resonance that stimulates organ activity.

<sup>21</sup> The disciplines of the medicine woman’s way, as Allen describes, include the ways of all women as well as those of advanced practitioners or specialists in the medicine path. These ways include the way of the daughter, the way of the household, the way of the mother, the way of the ritualist, the way of the teacher, and the way of wise woman” (*Grandmothers of the Light* 10).

and eliminate negative energy.<sup>22</sup> In all this, Erdrich inscribes the medicine of tribal practitioners, dismissing any association with Western gynaecology.

In other incidents than “the way of the mother,” however, Fleur exerts her power not to cure but “to kill.” In various occasions, Fleur combats colonialism face to face, expressing her shamanistic energy “to kill.” The quarantine police official Pukwan goes home, “crawl[ing] into bed, and [taking] no food from the moment until his last breath [passes]”(4). The tax agent, who asks Fleur for money, ends up “living in the woods and eating roots, gambling with ghosts”(9). George Many Women, who guides the White mappers into the woods, dies in an unexpected drowning (11). All this embodies anger and resistance. The Freudian configuration of the uncanny as something unfamiliar and yet “secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it” (Freud 245) best characterizes the “wild” power Fleur, among other ethnic shamans like Pilate in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, exerts to resist Euramerican imperialism. The repressed anger “returns” without restraint and becomes the site of a struggle where “the specific memory of traumatic historical events accedes to what Toni Morrison has called a ‘rememory’: an incantation, an iteration, of that position from which the subject speaks the present in the past,” to borrow Homi Bhabha’s words (“Unpacking My Library” 201).

While Nanapush narrates and celebrates Fleur’s resistance against the White colonization, Fleur ultimately loses her land to the White lumber companies. Near the end of the novel, as “her vision is obscured, [and] her Manitou helper [sleeps] deep in the lake,” Fleur vanishes “without leaving tracks” (215), an image that suggests her disappearance and, along with it, the disappearance of the unadulterated Anishinabe culture she represents. That the Native healing lore vanishes with the forests explains the onslaught of diseases that run through Erdrich’s representation of tribal communal history. “Disease” in this cultural context refers not merely to the epidemics of pox and fever, but also to the irreversible ills that turn the Chippewa into “a tribe of single-space documents, directives, policy. A tribe of pressed trees. A tribe of chicken-scratch that can be scattered by a wind, diminished to ashes by one struck match” (225). Nanapush as a witness to Anishinabe loss testifies to the destructive power of White

---

<sup>22</sup> Native Americans were far more advanced in using plants and special concoctions to fight against disease while colonial medicine was still a fledgling science well into the nineteenth century. It is, nonetheless, not widely known that Native American herbal medicine contributed to Western scientific medicine to a large extent. The fact is that more than two hundred drugs that were used by Native American tribes have become official in the *United States Pharmacopeia* since the first edition of 1820 and in the *National Formulary* since it began in 1888. For details, refer to Vogel.

conquest in his narration of tribal disease/dis-ease.

The death of the medicine man Mesobe at the outset of LaDuke's *Last Standing Woman* (28) echoes the disappearance of the medicine woman Fleur in the end of *Tracks*. Nonetheless, while Fleur is solitary, vanishing with the loss of the forest in the end of *Tracks*, the power line of the medicine in *Last Standing Woman* is retained and empowered by a feminine continuum as evidenced in LaDuke's narrative scheme. The storyteller, the narrator Ishkwegaabawiikwe (Anishinabe for "Last Standing Woman"), braids her story, the story of her tribal people, into the stories surrounding two other women also named "Last Standing Woman," thereby linking the present with the past and the future to constitute a cycle. The three threads finally converge with the recurrence of the name "Last Standing Woman" to forge a tribal communal history. This corresponds to Erdrich's late ex-husband Michael Dorris's image of weaving, which he uses in his conclusion of *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (1987). Dorris's novel ends with one of the three narrators braiding her hair. The three strands weave together in a tribal feminine act of creating order in contrast with Western glorification of logos. LaDuke commences her narrative with an image that ends Dorris's work. Therein her three threads work through time and space to fashion a much brighter tribal future than is envisioned in *Tracks*.

But LaDuke chronicles colonial disease in much the same way as Erdrich does. Her story is imbedded within recurring images of "disease": the pox and coughing brought by the French (45); the Church having come to the tribe in the early 1800s, bringing both the Bible and the smallpox (47); fully 60 percent of the Native Americans being afflicted with tuberculosis, 30 percent with trachoma and 20 percent with syphilis (86); the death of old woman Ishkweniibawiikwe and Situpiwini due to coughing disease (87). As the narrative moves on, "disease" becomes highly metaphorical as LaDuke recounts that "in the 1930's, a new disease, the Indian Hating Disease, causes Indians to be ill and to lose their lands" (126-30).

Like Erdrich, LaDuke eventually associates "disease" with tribal land loss. Tribal catastrophe commences with European expansionist lust. "Disease/dis-ease" should be understood in terms of native land loss. LaDuke explains "disease"—"a new disease, the Indian Hating Disease," by recounting native land loss. As argued earlier, LaDuke appears much more historically specific than Erdrich. For one thing, she is accurate in dates, chronicling native land loss from "a series of twenty or so treaties" in the 1860s (24, 29, 32), to the 1887 General Allotment Act (62), to the emergence of logging companies in the reservation in 1915 (66), to the enactment of a deceptive land

contract in 1916 (85-86, 89-90), etc. For another, LaDuke stresses historical evolution—how the Chippewa failed to follow capitalistic logic in the 1960s and 1970s (130-31), and the tribe renounced the White conception of private property in 1980s (140), and launched a campaign to reclaim their land (159-220); the Anishinabe negotiated with the government about the halting of logging (218) in 1990; St. Claire, the second Last Standing Woman, set up a trust fund for the land acquisitions in 1995 (257); and in 2000 the White Earth purchased fifty thousand acres of land, recovering over half of the reservation (285). LaDuke moves beyond the representation of the early-twentieth-century loss to the contemporary reconstitution of tribal land recovery. She in effect composes an alternative history to problematize the supremacy of the governmental official papers. As she perceives the land history from the tribal perspective, LaDuke reverses the White frontier thesis into a tribal politics of land recovery. *Last Standing Woman* constitutes a tribal re-mapping of the American landscape.

Indeed, while in *Tracks*, the Chippewa lose their trees just as the ancient magic power is diminishing, LaDuke dramatizes the White-Red confrontation in land via the well-designed and orchestrated “Standoff at White Earth” to reclaim tribal lost land. In chronicling not merely the loss but also recovery, she manages to alter the chaotic and grotesque world of violence and conflict, which the Ojibwe author Vizenor has earlier portrayed in his *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* and Erdrich has in *Tracks*. LaDuke furthermore moves beyond the White Earth of the Chippewa, aligning the Anishinabe with other Indian Nations for native coalition: she refers to uranium mining at Acoma, for instance, which is familiar to readers of Native American literature from Silko’s *Ceremony*. Consequently, by drawing upon native solidarity, LaDuke offers as much a progressive version of the tribal land history as the White frontier thesis, only with the direction reversed.

But tribal progression is never as linear as described in the White frontier thesis. LaDuke’s tribal narrative possesses a circular structure, incorporating one individual event within another, piling meaning upon meaning, until the accretion finally results in a story which is collective and tribal. LaDuke composes her book in four parts, each of which takes on historical complexity. She titles the four portions “The Refuge,” “The Re-awakening,” “The Occupation,” and “Oshki,” to chronicle seven generations of tribal contestation against White supremacy. “Seven” as well as “four” is a signifi-

cant number in tribal spiritual practices.<sup>23</sup> In LaDuke's case, "seven" matches the time span that her book covers: her story covers seven generations, commencing around 1862 with the Sioux uprising in Minnesota,<sup>24</sup> and ending in 2018 that opens a prospect for tribal future. The individual threads are tied together in Part IV as a revelation of tribal future. The utmost and prevailing idea is summarized in the Epilogue, in a diary written by the narrator. The diary both begins and ends the novel, configuring a distinctive tribal voice: "I wrote this because I am called to write. I have done the best I could and have tried to tell some of our story from my mother's words and from the words of my relatives" (299). As she continues to write, the diarist pins much hope on the "memories and principles" which are tribal: "There is a great deal I have omitted, but in the least, I tried to be honest with the memories and the principles" (299). The third Last Standing Woman takes up the role of a tribal historian as well as a storyteller that Nanapush plays in *Tracks*.

Tribal history, or rather, "counter history," to borrow Michel Foucault's terminology, relies on memory. To reclaim history for Native Americans means to challenge the ruling race's ideology in order to reconstruct and rectify their tribal history. The official American history starts in 1492 when Christopher Columbus discovered the New World, or rather, in 1607 when John Smith arrived on the banks of the James

---

<sup>23</sup> In addition to the four parts, there are also a prologue and an epilogue to *Last Standing Woman*, both of which are entitled with some version of "storyteller." While storytelling is a familiar Native American tradition as one can see from Silko's *Ceremony* and *Storyteller* (1981), it warrants a lengthy discussion later in the paper. "Last Standing Woman" as the storyteller tells the story in four parts. In tribal numerology, "four" is perhaps the most sacred number, with its power stemming from the four cardinal directions and four seasons. "Four" therefore symbolizes full circles or wholeness. Two early Native Renaissance representative works, Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968, 1999) and James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1986), also consist of four parts, echoing spatial and seasonal circles. Edith Swan's interpretation of symbolic geography in Silko's *Ceremony* pivots around the number "four," too. "Seven" is significant in tribal spiritual practice as well. In her *Grandmothers of the Light*, Allen identifies the "Seven Ways" as the disciplines of medicine which give shamanistic force for the medicine path. For details, refer to *Grandmothers of the Light*.

<sup>24</sup> In December 1861, at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota, around three hundred Lakota (Sioux) were killed by the US army, an incident which becomes symbolic of the governmental military aggression toward Native Americans. This event is the historical basis on which LaDuke initiates her narrative of the first-generation Anishinaabeg Last Standing Woman's friendship with Lakota woman Situpiwin. While LaDuke's novel is a recent literary representation of the history of tribal resistance, this incident is the title and the last chapter of Dee Brown's 1970 popular history of the defeat of American Indian armed protest against White expansion, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*; qtd. in Forsyth 144. LaDuke obviously picks up where Dee Brown has left off and uses this symbolic incident to initiate her chronicle. Another configuration of the Wounded Knee incident is *Lakota Woman* (1991), the autobiography of Mary Crow Dog, who was personally involved in the event. Forsyth's essay of "Writing Other Lives" draws on *Lakota Woman* exclusively to deploy Native American autobiographical representation of Euramerican coloniality.

River. But what Europeans took to be an “empty land” with an uncultivated landscape has now been shown to have been inhabited and worked by Native Americans for thousands of years before the arrival of the White man. There was a pre-European landscape that represented the achievements of tribal generations, and it is now upon this landscape, both geographical and cultural, which Euro-American patterns of land use and settlement are superimposed. LaDuke has responded to the distorted official documentation and the unfair treatment by presenting the self-adjusted colonial history and voice for the conquered, for what Bhabha suggests, “the native subject’s cultural resistances” (*The Location of Culture* 152). Or, rather, it is tribal memory woven together through LaDuke story-telling that should eventually substitute History with an upper-case H.

Specifically, LaDuke opens her story with the tribal migratory history of the Anishinabe:

There were many migrations that brought the people here. *Omaa, omaa*, here. Here to the place where the food grows on the water. *Anishinaabeg Akiing*, the people’s land, the land where the *manoomin*, the wild rice, grows. It had been perhaps a thousand years since the time the *Anishinaabeg* had left the big waters in *Waaban aki*, the land of the east. And they now turned *Ningaabii’anong*, to the west. [...] They traveled by foot on the land and by canoe on the rivers, traveling farther and farther to the west until they turned home. *Giiwedahn*. So it was that the families, the clans, and the head people of the *Anishinaabeg* came to the head waters of the Mississippi. Here, *Gaawaawaabiganikaag*, White Earth, named after the clay, the white clay you find here. It’s so beautiful, it is. Here the people would remain, in the good land that was theirs. (23; italics LaDuke’s)

In *Tracks*, the Chippewa lose their woodlands; LaDuke recovers them by tracing the ancestral migratory past. The passage intermingles English with a rhythmic tribal language filled with oral story-telling markers. Drawing upon tribal orality, LaDuke recovers the lost memory of the tribe’s home-base as she recounts migration. The italicized tribal words chanted represent both the “route” of the migration and the “root” of migratory people. Tribal history/memory is embodied in the land and travels with stories, with magic, with the presence of ancestors and spirits. This is their law, to

be rooted in land, “the one law for them that is the Creator’s” (23). By retrieving tribal memory, LaDuke bypasses White man’s law of “papers”: “The white man’s law was all paper” (23). Pierre Nora and Marc Roubush contend that memory is different from history, which is “the reconstruction always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. [...] History is a representation of the past. [...] History binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things” (285-86), which always responds to and represents dominant ideology. By contrast, according to Nora and Roubush,

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting [...]. It is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present. [...] Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects. (285-86)

Memory as the resource of resistance and identity has been confirmed and repeatedly examined by post-colonial exilic writers and critics (Hall 52). Homi Bhabha asserts “remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a power re-remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (*The Location of Culture* 63). In all this, “memory [serves as] a crucial tool and agent for insisting on the identity and the place in the world” (Weissberg 10). Through remembering, LaDuke retrieves the indigenous past in a conflation with the present and the future. The disjointed fragments are tied up into a unified whole to engender healing power: “the loss of identity [...] only begins to be healed when the forgotten connections are once more set in place. Such texts restore an imaginary fullness or plentitude, to set against the broken rubric of our past. They are resources of resistance and identity” (Hall 52).

LaDuke relies on the oral ritual of her Anishinabe tribe to heal. Indeed, as Allen remarks, “every medicine path has its attendant stories, and medicine people, also known as shamans, wise women, conjurors, adepts, mages, practitioners, or masters, [who] teach apprentices through story” (*Grandmothers of the Light* 3). *Last Standing Woman* commences with a chapter entitled “The Storyteller”: “The story, though, was all of our story. [...] But when the story flew into my ears, it made a picture in my mind I could never forget” (18). The narrator, the third Last Standing Woman, tells stories even when she is still a fetus: “Each month as the child grew, the stories came forth

with more force. And soon, they formed a web that surrounded them both and linked them from past to future. While before there seemed to be no time, now there seemed to be nothing but time” (295). The baby-girl’s coming “was signaled by the departure of the oldest person in the village, Mesabe. He was at once the story and the teller” (296). Mesabe’s passage “appeared to open the door for her entrance into life. It was also his life that brought forth the work of hers” (296).

While Mesabe is the tribal elder who knows the stories of the previous three generations and those of the following three generations (296), this power line is continued in the name of the three figures of “Last Standing Woman.” Specifically, whereas in *Tracks* feminine spirituality represented by Fleur vanishes with the loss of the woodlands, women in LaDuke’s story continue and transmit stories and in so doing, they sustain tribal tradition in a feminine continuum. Each of the tellings becomes not just a repetition of the tales but a metamorphosis of a past lost into a present lived and a future foreseen. Each story gives rise to a strategic disclosure and enhances self-empowerment and self-creation. Tribal history is neither the events chronologically arranged nor the documentation of an account of significant triumphs over significant defeats recorded by significant people who had benefited from the significant triumphs. Drawing upon a vital feminine line, LaDuke’s novel configures a testimony that embodies significant cultural and political repercussions. This testimony has involved a potency to communicate oppression and repression, poverty and subalternity, imprisonment as well as struggle for survival.

The pain of the irreversible loss in *Tracks* is therefore transformed into a potential for salvation in *Last Standing Woman*. This then fits in well with the Anishinabe as well as Cherokee and Pueblo notions of balance between positive and negative aspects of spiritual power. In fact, *Last Standing Woman* is double-binding. Two different modalities of time permeate the novel. While the frame story of loss and oppression is organized according to the time of “linear history,” history imposed by colonialists, tribal continuance and survival relies on the time of “ceremonial history,” “monumental time,” to borrow post-structuralist Julia Kristeva’s terminology.<sup>25</sup> The ceremonial history retains eternity by repetition. There are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature and whose

---

<sup>25</sup> The concept of “monumental” is originally used by Friedrich Nietzsche: “That the great moments in the struggle of the human individual constitute a chain, and this chain unites mankind across the millennia like a range of human mountain peaks, that the summit of such a long-ago moment shall be for me still living, bright and great—that is [...] monumental history” (68).

regularity corresponds to what is experienced by tribal people as cosmic order and harmony:

I do not believe that time is linear. Instead, I have come to believe that time is in cycles, and that the future is part of our past and the past is part of our future. Always, however, we are in new cycles. The cycles omit some pieces and collect other pieces of our stories and our lives. That is why we keep the names, and that is why we keep the words. (299)

Linear and cyclical time intertwine to embody a tribal world where the material and mundane merge with the spiritual and arcane, which LaDuke specifies in her novel: “The Annishinaabeg world undulated between material and spiritual shadows, never clear which was more prominent at any time” and the Native life is “not a life circumscribed by a clock” (24).

The ceremonial history is carried on by a name. The recurrence of the name, Ishkwegaabawiikwe, Last Standing Woman, speaks of tribal survival. Each of the three women called Last Standing Woman represents the past, the present, and the future respectively. The baby-girl, the narrator as she grows up to be the embodiment of the tribal voice, is a relation of Lucy “by name and by spirit” (18). As she testifies to retain tribal history, “Lucy St. Clair who named me was afraid we would forget. [...] And a picture of how we had these gifts we should keep” (18). This tribal consciousness as articulated by the narrator spotlights the danger of tribal identity involved in forgetting the location of origin as Native Americans lose their land, their common territory, to the Whites. Last Standing Woman, in the repetition of the name, maintains the dynamics of remembrance and commemoration. There are, indeed, three things that guide tribal direction, as the narrator reclaims, “our name, our clan, and our religion” (299). As there is always a woman called “Last Standing,” the tribe will never perish and its culture moves on through the keeping of the “names,” and thus, “the words” (299). Last Standing Woman is by no means “last,” but rather symbolic of “the continuation and the rebirth of her people, something that is indigenous to White Earth” (Matchie 71).

Consequently, *Last Standing Woman* spotlights medicine that restores harmony and heals, whereas *Tracks* underscores disease that kills. Mindemoyen in *Last Standing Woman* teaches the use of botanical medicine (83). Though “by the time that the epidemics of tuberculosis and trachoma had wreaked their havoc in Pine Point, few

[tribal people] were left to carry on the songs, dances, and stories” (116), tribal medicine regains its momentum as the White Earth people build their own Anishinabe Health Center (289). They recover “Medicine bags” (272). The Shingobay summons “*jiisakiiwinini* to invite spirits with singing, drums, shrieks, and growls. It is a ceremony to summon the dead spirit” (31). The sweat lodge vibrates to bring back “balance”; “Drums are now returned to the White Earth” (238-39). The same is true of “the *Midewiwin* water drums and the big drums, both of which were in use in the villages and not on display or stored away in a backroom in the museum” (273). Whereas the drum is wrapped and stored in *Tracks*, drums in *Last Standing Woman* are put into ceremonial use. Drums highlight continuation as the first Last Standing Woman dreams of a Thunderbird Drum, the second Last Standing Woman recovers ceremonial drums from the museum where they have been “stored for fifty or so odd years since the day they were taken by the priests or Indian agents” (273), and the third Last Standing Woman tells of them. Finally, Lucy St. Clair, the second Last Standing Woman, who gives birth to her daughter at a White man’s obstetrician hospital, founds the tribal Midwife program (288-89). In her, “Western Medicine and Anishinaabeg Medicine were merged” (289), as LaDuke writes toward the end of the novel.

While the centrality of the works of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Nico Israel among others on post-colonial experience has ensured that the Middle East, India, and the Caribbean remain the most conspicuous topics, the experience of the displaced peoples in the First World itself tends to be ignored. The US government policies inflicted upon the indigenous people, in fact, have caused a most poignant colonial experience among Native Americans: removal of tribes west of white settlement areas, involving dislocation from ancestral lands in 1830; allotment of land into individual rather than tribal ownership in 1887, thereby discouraging the maintenance of larger tribal communities; reorganization of traditional tribal leadership into “democratically” elected “Tribal Councils” in 1934, which allowed little self-government on reservations; and termination of Native American nations in 1950, which encouraged further dislocation into urban centers. All these federal implementations, as Forsyth suggests, aim at resolving the problem that Native American Nations pose to the US: “vanishing Americans” “stubbornly refuse to disappear” (146). With governmental appropriation of land, the indigenes face unprecedented experience of internal “disease,” of dislocation and displacement, after they have suffered from the epidemic diseases brought to their homeland by European colonists. Over 2,000 nations of indigenous peoples have become extinct. But those who remain, like the Anishinabe,

continue to transform their grief into actions of resistance. This paper employs disease/dis-ease as the cutting edge of a comparative reading of Chippewa tribal history, memory, and culture in Erdrich's *Tracks* and LaDuke's *Last Standing Woman*. Both authors ensure a tribal voice in their inscription of colonial disease and Native dis-ease. Both depict illness as the outcome of environmental catastrophe. LaDuke translates and works through Native disease/dis-ease by weaving generational continuity among three figures of Last Standing Woman, whereas Erdrich seems to fixate her text upon irreversible disease/dis-ease as solitary Fleur becomes vulnerable to colonial exploitation. The concept of disease/dis-ease has double edges: Erdrich uses it as a critique of European colonization while LaDuke envisions a potential salvation power in it. Both together, however, affirm that tribal medicine has always been holistic, treating the body and spirit as one and illness as a sign of imbalance. Therein, both redeem Native spirituality, which would otherwise be consigned into oblivion at the dangerous moment of disease and dis-ease.

### Works Cited

- Aitken, Larry P. and Edwin W. Haller. *Two Cultures Meet: Pathways for American Indians to Medicine*. Duluth: U of Minnesota P, 1990.
- Allen, Paula Gunn. *Grandmothers of the Light: A Medicine Woman's Sourcebook*. Boston: Beacon P, 1991.
- . *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Boston: Beacon P, 1986.
- Anderson, Warwick. "Disease, Race and Empire." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 70 (1996): 94-118.
- . "Where is the Postcolonial History of Medicine?" *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 72 (1998): 522-30.
- Arnold, David. *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture and European Expansion*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- . "Unpacking My Library . . . Again." *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*. Ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti. London: Routledge, 1996. 199-211.
- Clarke, Joni Adamson. "Why Bears Are Good to Think and Theory Doesn't Have to Be Murder: Transformation and Oral Tradition in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*." *Studies in*

- American Indian Literatures* 4.1 (1992): 28-48.
- Cook, Noble David. *Born to Die: Disease and New World Conquest, 1492*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.
- Cook-Lynn, Elizabeth. *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner & Other Essays: A Tribal Voice*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1996.
- Cowley, Geoffrey. "The Great Disease Migration." *Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives*. Ed. Phillip Whitten and David Hunter. New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1993. 268-70.
- Crosby, Alfred W. *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequence of 1492*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972.
- Erdrich, Louise. *Tracks*. New York: Henry Holt, 1988.
- Fanon, Frantz. "Medicine and Colonialism." *The Cultural Crisis of Modern Medicine*. Ed. John Ehrenreich. New York: Monthly Review P, 1978. 229-51.
- Forsyth, Susan. "Writing Other Lives: Native American (Post)coloniality and Collaborative (Auto)biography." *Comparing Postcolonial Literatures: Dislocations*. Ed. Ashok Bery and Patricia Murray. New York: Palgrave, 2000. 144-58.
- Freud, Sigmund. "'The Uncanny.'" *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey. Vol. 17. London: Hogarth, 1976. 217-52. 24 vols.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. "Identity Politics, Syncretism, Catholicism, and Anishinabe Religion in Louis Erdrich's *Tracks*." *Religion and Literature*. 26.1 (1994): 107-34.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Padmini Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf P, 1997. 392-403.
- Israel, Nico. *Outlandish: Writing Between Exile and Diaspora*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000.
- Juan, Rose Hsiu-li. *Fantasizing the Other Stories: Salman Rushdie's and Louise Erdrich's Narratives from the Margins*. Taipei: Bookman, 2000.
- Kristeva, Julia. *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.
- LaDuke, Winona. *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life*. Cambridge, Mass.: South End, 1999.
- . "Being Left: Activism On and Off the Reservation—David Barsamian Interviews Winona LaDuke." *ZMagazine* 19 September 2003 <<http://uis4n.tripod.com/id8.html>>.

- . *Last Standing Woman*. Stillwater: Voyageur, 1998.
- Larson Sidner. “The Fragmentation of a Tribal People in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*.” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 17.2 (1993): 1-13.
- Lupton, Deborah. *Medicine as Culture: Illness, Disease and the Body in Western Societies*. London: SAGE, 2003.
- Matchie, Tom. “Fighting the Windigo: Winona LaDuke’s Peculiar Postcolonial Posture in *Last Standing Woman*.” *FEMSPEC* 2.2 (2001): 66-72.
- McCafferty, Kate. “Generative Adversity: Shapeshifting Pauline/Leopolda in *Tracks* and *Love Medicine*.” *American Indian Quarterly* 21.4 (1997): 729-801.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life.” *Untimely Meditations*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Ed. Daniel Breazeale. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. 57-124.
- Nora, Pierre and Marc Roubush. “Between Memory and History: Les lieux de mémoire.” *History and Memory in African-American Culture*. Ed. Genevieve Fabre and Robert G. O’Meally. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. 284-300.
- Owens, Louis. *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1992.
- Peterson, Nancy J. “History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*.” *PMLA* 109.5 (1994): 982-94.
- Sarvé-Gorham, Kristan. “Power Line: The Motif of Twins and the Medicine Women of *Tracks* and *Love Medicine*.” *Bucknell-Review: A Scholarly Journal of Letters, Arts and Sciences* 39.1 (1995): 167-90.
- Stookey, Lorena Laura. *Louise Erdrich: A Critical Companion*. Westport: Greenwood P, 1999.
- Vogel, Virgil J. *American Indian Medicine*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1990.
- . “What Has American Indian Medicine Given Us?” *National Forum* 71.2 (1991): 28-30.
- Watts, Sheldon. *Epidemics and History: Disease, Power and Imperialism*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1997.
- Weaver, Jace. *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community*. Cambridge: Oxford UP, 1997.
- Weissberg, Liliane. “Introduction.” *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity*. Ed. Dan Ben-Amos and Liliane Weissberg. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1999. 7-26.
- Worboys, Michael. *Spreading Germs: Disease Theories and Medical Practice in Britain, 1865-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.

### About the Author

Hsinya Huang is Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at National Kaohsiung Normal University, Taiwan. Her research interests include East-West comparative studies, feminist literature, American ethnic writers, Native American culture and history, and cultural studies. Her recent publications include "Migrancy and the Detours of Identity: Location/Dislocation/Relocation in Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup*," *Tamkang Review* 33.3-33.4 (2003): 33-66; "Imagining Chicana Queer: Gloria Anzaldúa's New Mestiza," *Chung Wai Literary Monthly* 32.3 (2003): 35-62; "Tribal Healing in Native American Women's Writings," *Chung Wai Literary Monthly* 31.10 (2003): 149-92; "Three Women's Texts and the Healing Power of the Other Woman," *Concentric: Studies in English Literature and Linguistics* 28.1 (2002): 153-80; "Writing Hiroshima, Writing Trauma: Catastrophe—Trauma—Memory—Testimony," *Chung Wai Literary Monthly* 30.9 (2002): 86-117; "Imagining the Chinese Woman Warrior," *Tamkang Review* 31.4-32.1 (2001): 139-71; and "Orientalist Discourse and Contemporary Women's Writings," *Journal of Women and Gender Studies* 13 (2002): 141-75. She is currently working on two books: one about disease and medicine in Native American writings and the other an introduction to Western lesbian literature.

[Received 22 September 2003;  
accepted 12 November 2003;  
revised 28 November 2003]

Disease, Empire, and (Alter) Native Medicine in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, and Winona LaDuke's *Last Standing Woman*. Hsin-Ya Huang. *History*. 2004. This paper studies Native American disease/dis-ease in relation to Euramerican imperial expansion, taking it as the cutting edge of contemporary Native American literary representation of tribal. Continue Reading. View PDF.