

## An Application of Tribal Critical Race Theory in Louise Erdrich's *LaRose*

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### Abstract

This research paper aims to explore how Native American writer Louise Erdrich explicates the impact of Euro-American power on indigenous people, reflecting injustices and the power of kinship in her novel *LaRose*, the final installment of the Justice Trilogy. This paper attempts to analyze Erdrich's work through Bryan Brayboy's concept of Tribal Critical Race Theory, examining Indigenous populations and cultural preservation. It also highlights the Western supremacy over the Native American people as a unique instance in this novel and analyzes it from a postcolonial standpoint and through Tribal Critical Race Theory.

**Keywords:** Native American, Colonialism, Ojibwe, TribalCrit, Atonement, historical trauma, Tribal Race Theory, *LaRose*.

### Introduction

Louise Karen Erdrich is the prominent Native American writer. She tells complex stories about the Native American people's identities, communities, societies, cultures, and humanity in her works. Her works reflect the Ojibwe people's life their Native American heritage. Her unique way of storytelling style is often likened to those of William Faulkner. She successfully combines historical accounts into her writing, as seen by her body of work. She desires to preserve Native American culture by documenting historical narratives in the oral tradition.

### *LaRose*

The novel *LaRose* is the last work of her great Justice Trilogy, after *The Plague of Doves* and *The Round House*. The novel's narration was reflected from the third-person perspective. The story of the novel revolves around the young *LaRose* Iron's efforts to heal his broken family after a tragic death. The novel begins with *LaRose*'s father, Landreaux, who accidentally kills Dusty, of his neighbor Ravich's family. Peter and his wife, Nola, the half-sister of Landreaux's wife, Emmaline, live with their children, Dusty and Maggie. They become sickened with grief because of the loss of their son Dusty. Landreaux is devastated by the accident, and following Ojibwe Indian custom, he and his wife, Emmaline, decide to send their youngest son, *LaRose*, to live with Peter and Nola's family as atonement.

It's an Ojibwe 's tradition in Emmaline's ancestry to name LaRose the youngest child to avoid bad luck and misfortune in their life. The novel's narration is a nonlinear one, and it stretches way back to the year 1830. The local Catholic priest, Father Travis, tries his best to reassure Emmaline, who wants her son LaRose back. Both the Raviches and Irons families decide to share the LaRose back and forth, month by month. Even if Dusty convinces Landreaux through LaRose that killing was indeed an accident and he should not feel guilty, he still does not come out from it. In the Raviches family, LaRose vows to help Maggie to prevent her mother Nola's state of suicide. He removes all poisonous things from the house and mainly takes off bullets from the hunting rifle. Nola feels relieved after she learns about Larose's communication with her son Dusty, and her darkness starts to fade.

The novel's story takes a new turn with the character Romeo, who is determined to prove that the killing of Dusty was not an accident in order to regain respect in the community. He is the real father of Hollis. He gave Hollis up to Emmaline and Landreaux to have a better shot at life. Romeo believes strongly that his arm and leg injury, sustained during a time when he and Landreaux ran away from boarding school, is Landreaux's fault. With the intention of derailing the life of Landreaux Romeo, he tells a new story to Peter that his son's death is not an accidental one and that he has been killed by Landreaux after he has obtained a copy of the coroner's report on Dusty.

Peter believes Romeo's words and decides to take revenge against Landreaux. LaRose inadvertently saves Landreaux's life by removing the bullet from Peter's gun. Father Travis discloses his love towards Emmaline, and he realizes that he cannot have her. In the last part of the novel, about Romeo's son, he graduates from high school, and he is preparing to go for the National Guard. Meanwhile, the Irons and the Raviches put the past behind them and finally come together. Romeo is forgiven, and he receives an invitation to his son's graduation party. LaRose is happy to see both families finally come together. Hollis and Josette begin a romance.

### **Tribal Critical Race Theory**

The Tribal Critical Theory was introduced by Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy in 2005. This theory draws inspiration from Critical Race Theory. While Critical Race Theory concentrates on race, positing that racism is a social construct ingrained in legal systems and regulations rather than being the result of personal prejudice or bias, Tribal Critical Race Theory, formally known as 'TribalCrit', focuses mainly on the issues of Indigenous People in relation to the United States and its laws and policies. Brayboy states that the function of TribalCrit is "to expose the inconsistencies in structural systems and institutions—like colleges and universities—and make the situation better for Indigenous students" (441). It also analyzes unique experiences of indigenous people by stating that colonization is endemic rather than just Racism.

The Critical Race Theory insists further on identifying various levels of oppression but lacks understanding from the perspective of Native American people. TribalCrit is born out of this gap, and it needs to highlight Indigenous people and their survival in a Eurocentric state. It also scrutinizes the pervasive influence of Euro-American power structures, affirming the inherent sovereignty of Native peoples. Brayboy diligently addresses the ongoing issues facing Native people, including:

"[i]ssues of language shift and language loss, natural resources management, the lack of students graduating from colleges and universities, the overrepresentation of American

Indians in special education, and power struggles between federal, state, and tribal governments" (430).

To address these systemic failures, Brayboy proposes nine foundational tenets of TribalCrit:

1. Colonization is endemic to society.
2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain.
3. Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of [their] identities.
4. Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.
5. The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.
6. Governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation.
7. Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups. (429)
8. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.
9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change. (430)

This research paper explores Bryan Brayboy's Tribal Critical Race Theory, analyzing the notion that colonization is endemic to society, as depicted in Louise Erdrich's novel *LaRose*.

### **Applying Tribal Critical Race Theory in the novel *LaRose***

Louise Erdrich is a prominent voice in the Native American Renaissance and a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians- weaves the rich symbolism and lived experiences of her heritage into the fabric of her writing. Her novel, *LaRose*, the final novel of her 'Justice trilogy', explores the universal themes of grief, justice, atonement, healing, and particularly about indigenous kinship system, resistance to federal law, cultural preservation through traditional Ojibwe storytelling, and the lasting impacts of historical trauma and colonialism.

The novel is examined through the Brayboy's concept of "Colonization is endemic to society" (Brayboy 429). In this view, colonization is endemic to society, functioning as an ongoing process of Euro-American dominance that manifests through the boarding school system, the struggle for cultural preservation, intergenerational trauma, and historical grief. Boarding school system is the brutal tool of colonial dominance; it aims at eradicating Native American people's identity, language and culture. It was founded by Richard Pratt in 1879, the first off-reservation boarding school, Carlisle.

The boarding school system is introduced in America is to civilize the indigenous people but real intention is to erase the true identity of Native people. Robbins notes that her own difficulty with a new language "reminded [her] how hard it must have been for Indian boarding school students when they first arrived at unfamiliar places where only English was spoken"

(Robbins 136). About Boarding school, Smith states that, “these schools were frequently administered in cooperation with Christian missions with the expressed purpose of Christianising, particularly in Latin America, North America, the Arctic and the Pacific” (Smith 3). In the novel, Louise Erdrich explores experiences of indigenous people’s historical trauma, abuse and cultural suppression. According to Dr. Marie Battiste, “Eurocentric thinkers dismissed Indigenous knowledge in the same way they dismissed any socio-political cultural life they did not understand: they found it to be unsystematic and incapable of meeting the productivity needs of the modern world” (5).

In the boarding school, Indigenous people faced cruel realities like children were forcibly taken from their communities and they are prohibited from using their traditional dress and strictly restricted speak their indigenous Ojibwe language. In Carlisle Indian industrial school, Pennsylvania, Indigenous children are intentionally disconnected from their traditional heritage. The school makes indigenous students to adjust the concept of white and its organization and students are compelled adhere Euro-American way of life style. In *LaRose*, Erdrich highlights the colonial dominance of Euro-Americans by citing the historical figure Richard Henry Pratt, whose ideology sought to erase Indigenous culture. In his writings, he states that, “the hope and salvation of the race was *immersing the Indians in our civilization and when we get them under, holding them there until they are thoroughly soaked*” (qtd. in Erdrich 234).

Erdrich includes the chilling historical perspective of Richard Henry Pratt to highlight the colonial mindset:

*A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense I agree with this sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indians there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.* (qtd. in Erdrich 236)

In the boarding school, the second *LaRose*, the eleven-year-old daughter of the first *LaRose*, was abused by the trader Mackinnon. She is asked to clean a white person's house during an outing program and is made to do woodwork, perpetuating the notion that Indigenous people are inferior to other races. David Wallace Adams, in *Education for Extinction*, elucidates that the Euro-American intention behind establishing boarding schools was to eradicate Indigenous culture, stating:

For tribal elders who had witnessed the catastrophic developments of the nineteenth century—the bloody warfare, the near-extinction of the bison, the scourge of disease and starvation, the shrinking of the tribal land base, the indignities of reservation life, the invasion of missionaries and white settlers—there seemed to be no end to the cruelties perpetrated by whites. And after all this, the schools.  
(Adams 336–37)

Boarding school system makes her believe that, “A list of races she had to memorize placed white the highest, then yellow, black, and finally savage. According to the curriculum, her people were on the bottom” (Erdrich 234).

Cultural preservation is another important aspect in Tribal Critical Race theory, focusing on the systematic protection and revitalization of Indigenous people’s cultures, languages, sovereignty and identity. It also ensures that indigenous cultures are primary guardians and interpreter of their own heritage. The novel title *LaRose* itself holding traditional Ojibwe name it

symbolizes protector or guardian. In the novel, Landreaux kills his neighbor family's son Dusty accidentally, this killing is the central plot of the story of the novel. Due to this traumatic incident, Landreaux gets devastated; he and his wife, Emmaline, make the difficult decision to give their son, LaRose, to the Iron family as a form of atonement "Our son will be your son now" (Erdrich 18).

Erdrich explicates Ojibwe tradition that adoption is not abandonment by one family to take over by another family completely but two family will rise by Landreaux family and peter family together. It is good example of Ojibwe traditional heritage. Erdrich explains the adoption in Ojibwe culture for an interview as, "informal adoption is common in Native American cultures and being temporary parents can be very painful" (Nowick 73). The novel further explores indigenous people how preserve Ojibwe culture and spiritual ceremonies that, "Landreaux that his friend Randall, who ran sweat lodges and taught Ojibwe culture, history and deer skinning in the tribal high school" (Edrich 59). Landreaux and his friend, Randall, emphasize the importance of preserving traditional learning, especially sweat lodge customs in their conversation. Maintaining traditional practices among the Ojibwe people preserves cultural identity and continuity, thereby strengthening Indigenous communities.

Another important factor of colonization in an endemic society is intergenerational trauma, which is highly elaborated in the novel. Intergenerational trauma refers to colonization and cultural suppression of families and communities across generations of indigenous people in America. In her reporting on the Lakota people, Evelyn Nieves highlights the expertise of Dr. Philip May, who notes that indigenous grief is not merely personal but is "compounded by limited opportunities, historical trauma and contemporary discrimination" (Nieves, 1996, p. 14).

In Ojibwe culture, the name LaRose represents innocence and healing. In the novel, the name recurs through multiple generations of the Emmaline family to symbolize their protection from danger: "It was a name both innocent and powerful, and had belonged to the family's healers" (Erdrich 13). In her review of *LaRose*, Donna Seaman observes that "As Erdrich explores the inevitable anguish and complications inherent in this act of sacrifice and attempt of justice, she takes soundings of the wellsprings of trauma and strength shaping these grieving households" (Seaman 19).

In the novel, Erdrich represents historical trauma of indigenous women through the character, first LaRose, Eleven years old young girl is abused by Mackinnon a trader in Ojibwe trading post: "Mackinson viciously kicked her, or kicked one of them, as he passed. She went hoarse that afternoon, which only made her voice more irritating" (Erdrich 14-15). She eventually escapes with Wolfred to start a new life after they kill Mackinnon; however, she later dies of tuberculosis. The disease reflects the intergenerational trauma of the Indigenous people an infinite cruelty passed from one generation to the next.

Just as the first LaRose passed this legacy down, the deaths of the second and third LaRoses exhibit the impact of this trauma. Further tracing the trauma and extreme grief of Indigenous people in the novel, Erdrich elucidates how White medical professionals often refused to treat Native patients. When the first LaRose's health deteriorates due to tuberculosis, Wolfred takes her to the hospital. Dr. Haniford Ames is initially unwilling to treat her, admitting her only after Wolfred's persistent conviction. As Erdrich notes, "the doctor was at first opposed to bringing her into the regimen. Because she was an Indian, he was certain she could not be cured" (Erdrich 226).

The second LaRose is also affected by tuberculosis, like her mother, and struggles to fight the disease repeatedly. Erdrich observes that Indigenous women faced demanding work

under the control of White authorities: "She learned to clean white people's houses during Carlisle's outing program, gouging congealed dust from corners with a knife" (Erdrich 234). The novel further illustrates the psychological trauma experienced by the young LaRose, who repeatedly inquires about Dusty, unaware of his accidental death, asking, "Where is Dusty? . . . Can I play?" (17). Besides, his can sense strange feeling regarding living between his biological family and Nola's family reflects his initial psychological wounding. Through the novel *LaRose*, Louise Erdrich powerfully represents the various levels of trauma faced by the Ojibwe people as a result of the White supremacy that continues to exist in USA.

### Conclusion

Louise Erdrich illustrates the pervasive nature of systemic violence and in the lives of Indigenous people by placing the assault of a Native American woman at the novel's core. *LaRose* poignantly illustrates how colonization persists as a fundamental aspect of Indigenous life, showing the ongoing impact of Euro-American dominance on Native populations in the United States. The novel offers a fertile ground for examining and interpreting the narrative through Bryan Brayboy's Tribal Critical Race Theory.

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