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Two-Spirit Identities and Indigenous Resistance: A Study on *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*

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Abstract

This paper examines Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), focusing on the interwoven themes of gender fluidity, Indigenous resilience and cultural hybridity. The protagonist, Father Damien, also known as Agnes De Witt, exemplifies gender fluidity, resisting colonial binary constructs. Utilizing Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and insights from Indigenous queer studies, this analysis examines Two-spirit identities within Ojibwe culture, thereby underlining Erdrich's critique of colonial impositions. Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance positions storytelling as a means of Indigenous resilience amid trauma, illustrating how hybrid identities resist erasure. Through these frameworks, Erdrich's work is discussed as a complex narrative of Indigenous endurance, gender fluidity and cultural survival. In a world increasingly marked by divisions and separatism, it is crucial to advocate for a politics of identity negotiation that addresses the ongoing struggles of marginalized communities. This research paper also highlights the importance of bridging cultural divides through the examination of Indigenous narratives and their relevance in contemporary discourse.

Keywords: Indigeneity, Two-spirit, Queer, Cross-dressing, Survivance, Resistance

From Oral Tradition to Written Renewal: An Introduction

Indigenous literatures of the United States have long occupied a marginal position within the broader literary landscape, often overshadowed by dominant Euro-American narratives. This marginality is rooted in a history of colonialism, which systematically suppressed Indigenous voices, misrepresented Native experiences and neglected the rich diversity of Indigenous oral traditions and cultures. Indigenous storytelling, however, has endured as a powerful means of cultural expression, deeply rooted in oral traditions that preserve the histories, values and cosmologies of various tribes and nations across the continent. Despite the resilience of these traditions, Indigenous literatures remain underrepresented in mainstream literary curricula and publishing, often facing challenges related to authenticity and appropriation, as non-Indigenous interpretations distort, objectify and often commercialize Indigenous experiences.

What Kenneth Lincoln described as the "Native American Renaissance" marked a "written renewal of oral tradition" (8), with authors like Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch, N. Scott Momaday and Gerald Vizenor leading this resurgence. These writers brought increased visibility to Native literature, advocating for storytelling that addresses historical trauma, survival and cultural continuity. Elevating Indigenous literatures is essential for a more inclusive and comprehensive American literary canon, one that embraces the diversity of experiences Indigenous authors bring to the national narrative.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Native American authors seek to inform non-Native readers about the impacts of three centuries of colonial rule and its devastating effects on Indigenous communities. Their works aim to recount the past while capturing present realities

marked by poverty, loss of familial and land ties, brutality, disinheritance and dispossession. These writings expose how colonialism leaves Indigenous people struggling to survive in modern corporate America and focus on healing past traumas for future survival. Highlighting Native oral cultures in written form becomes a political tool of resistance. In the introduction to *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*, poets Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird distinguish between English and "'red English'" (25) while discussing the need to use the written medium to convey oral traditions. Central to contemporary Native American literatures is the theme of resistance, which compels these writers to "problematize the relation between English and [the] oral traditional world" (Murray 77).

The Politics of Resistance in Indigenous Storytelling: Theory and Application

The Ojibwe author and postmodernist Gerald Vizenor's Concept of Survivance, articulated in the essay "Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice" anchors a critical framework for understanding Native American narratives as acts of resistance against colonial erasure. The term is a fusion of 'survival' and 'resistance', encapsulating the complexities of Native American identity and existence in a post-colonial context. It operates as a linguistic, literary and rhetorical practice that asserts the presence of Native peoples and Native epistemologies within discourses typically dominated by colonial constructs. Vizenor highlights the complexities of defining survivance, emphasizing that it transcends simplistic categorizations. He asserts that survivance is grounded in the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples, particularly evident in their storytelling traditions. Such survivance narratives challenge portrayals of Indigenous individuals as victims or absent from contemporary society, instead showcasing their ongoing cultural vitality and agency. They, in turn, aim to give visibility to the indigenous populations.

Vizenor asserts that survivance signifies "a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry" (1). This assertion challenges the dominant discourse that often frames Indigenous peoples solely through the lens of historical trauma, instead recognizing their enduring existence and cultural resilience. Vizenor's use of the term "post-Indian" (1) serves to illustrate the dynamic and evolving representations of Native identities in contemporary contexts, highlighting how these identities are actively constructed through storytelling, performance, and cultural practices that subvert colonial narratives and reclaim agency over Indigenous self-representation. He identifies key attributes associated with survivance narratives, including humour, creativity and inclusivity, which reflect the resilience inherent in Indigenous narratives. He emphasizes that survivance involves the "continuance of stories", suggesting that storytelling is a potential mechanism for asserting cultural identity and tradition (1). Vizenor, therefore, underscores the importance of Indigenous storytelling as a living tradition that honours historical legacies while affirming the presence and vitality of Native cultures in the modern world.

This notion of survivance is particularly relevant when examining the representation of gender and sexuality within Native narratives, where alternative identities, such as those encapsulated by the concept of Two-spirits, challenge the binary constructs imposed by colonial ideologies. The term "Two-spirit," coined in 1990, describes Indigenous individuals who defy binary gender expectations and is embraced by Native Americans for its significance in politicising gender nonconformity. It serves as a cultural and political counter to derogatory labels like "berdache" (Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 2). The representation of Two-spirit identities in contemporary narratives aligns with Vizenor's idea of narrative resistance, emphasizing the cultural resilience and agency of Indigenous peoples. In *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (hereafter referred to as *Last Report*), Louise Erdrich exemplifies survivance by portraying Native American identities—particularly Two-spirit identities—as inherently resilient, diverse and multifaceted.

Two-spirit identities, central to many Indigenous cultures, were valued for their gender fluidity and diversity, playing essential roles within the sacred web of life and society. They stand in

contrast with Judeo-Christian traditions, which enforce rigid male-female roles within a heterosexual framework. As Duane Champagne notes in his preface to *Two Spirit People: American Indian Lesbian Women and Gay Men*, these traditions often label alternative sexualities as sinful, asserting they are "outside of God's plan... lead[ing] to oppression and persecution" (xviii).

The New Zealand-based Professor and Academician Richard Ekins, in *Male Femaling: A Grounded Theory Approach to Cross-dressing and Sex-changing*, examines cross-dressing as a transformative act that subverts traditional gender norms and creates ambiguity, challenging dominant societal constructs of gender. From birth, gender and sexuality are socially assigned based on anatomy, a categorization that shapes expectations and behaviours throughout one's life. As individuals navigate these roles, they perform and fulfil societal norms, yet continually negotiate their identities within this gendering process—often leading to what is taken for granted in gender assumptions. For queer identities, "'this taken for granted' course of things is being variously rendered problematic . . . in different contexts and with various consequences" (Ekins 18). Thus, contemporary Native American storytelling actively resists the binary gender systems imposed by colonialism, advocating for the celebration of diverse identities and alternative models of understanding gender within society.

In this context, Erdrich's *Last Report* emerges as a brilliant exploration of fluid identities, challenging the rigid Western constructs of gender and sexuality. Erdrich's narrative celebrates the diversity of identities within the Ojibwe community, encompassing queer, transgender and non-binary experiences. Through her storytelling, she acts as a form of resistance against dominant ideologies, illuminating the acceptance of gender diversity that has long thrived in Indigenous cultures.

Gender Nonconformity as Survivance: A Detailed Analysis of *The Last Report*

Queer and Transgender Studies challenge normative definitions of gender and sexuality, aiming to illuminate complex identities that resist simple categorization. The term "transgender" encompasses various identities, including transsexuals, travesties and two spirits, indicating "a broad spectrum of gender practices" (Stryker and Whittle 254). *Last Report* delves into the queer dimensions of Father Damien Modeste, presented through first and third-person narratives. Father Damien's gender performance is described as "the most transgressive of those described within Erdrich's oeuvre in terms of both content and duration" (Iovannone 57), illustrating a profound transgendering process. While Native American cultures historically recognized diverse gender identities, mainstream society has frequently marginalized or misunderstood these identities.

The novel presents Father Damien Modeste/Agnes De Witt as a character who embodies and performs gender identity by challenging traditional ideological definitions. Erdrich critiques restrictive ideological frameworks through this character, who fluidly transitions across gender identities and roles. Damien emerges as a complex figure with a layered identity: Sister Cecilia, a white Catholic nun, embodies the persona of Agnes De Witt, who later transforms into Father Damien Modeste after experiencing a series of traumatic events. This fluidity in identity positions Father Damien as queer, transgender and transvestite, challenging conventional categorization and reflecting the nuanced nature of gender identity in contemporary discourse.

Spanning 87 years, the novel traces Agnes's transformation from a female Chopin player to a male priest. Following Father Damien's death, Agnes adopts his masculine persona, initially struggling to suppress her femininity. Slowly, through her interactions with the Ojibwe community and tribal traditions, she comes to view gender fluidity as natural. Agnes's continual oscillation between identities transcends the binaries of masculinity/femininity and Ojibwe/Catholic traditions, positioning her as a gender trickster who navigates these cultural realms, embodying the Two-spirit trope central to Native identities.

In the Ojibwe cultural context, the figure of Wishkob— a man who lived as one of the women— serves as an example of gender nonconformity. Kashpaw, an Ojibwe elder, recognizes

this characteristic in Father Damien, recalling, "Perhaps, he thought, here was the man like the famous Wishkob . . . [who] had lived until old . . . as one of the women." This recognition of Father Damien's "girlish earnestness" and his perception of the priest as "too womanly" (63) underscores the Ojibwe's acceptance of gender diversity.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is significant in understanding Agnes's transformation into Father Damien. Agnes's gender identity is not fixed but is shaped through performances. Her attempts to embody masculinity challenge the idea of a stable, authentic gender identity, as her public and private personas frequently clash. According to Butler, "gender is produced through the stylization of the body," or it is through "bodily gestures" and "styles of various kinds" that "the gendered self" is formed. (*Gender Trouble* 192) Agnes, initially embodying conventional feminine gestures, transitions to enact masculine attributes in her role as Father Damien, reshaping her gender expression to align with her priestly identity. She consciously discards feminine mannerisms like "leaning out with a hand held out on her hip" in favour of masculine expressions, using the mirror as a reflective tool in solidifying her gender identity. In contrast to her life as Sister Cecilia, when she "used to walk with eyes downcast", the new persona of Father Damien now walks "straight ahead", signalling a shift in confidence and the assertion of masculinity (Erdrich 76). This shift highlights the performative nature of gender, as Agnes's identity vacillates between public and private personas. Erdrich's question— "Between these two, where was the real self?"—underscores the fragmentation of identity and the challenge of authenticity when shaped by external expectations (76). The blurred distinctions between Sister Cecilia, Agnes and Father Damien reveal each as a "manufactured" layer of "gesture and pose", suggesting that gender is constructed and practised rather than fixed.

The portrayal of Damien is reminiscent of the life of the renowned American Jazz musician Billy Tipton, who lived as Dorothy Tipton until his seventeenth year. Diane Wood Middlebrook, his biographer, remarks in *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton*, "*she* was the actor, *he* was the role" (11). It is his gender change that has given Billy Tipton a large audience. Father Damien, or Agnes, subtly redefines gender roles to gain acceptance within the Native community. At the first Holy Mass, the priest performs traditional rituals with masculine and feminine expressions, modulating voice to control its pitch and making "the Mass" feel "like memorized music" (68). This fluid embodiment of gender contrasts sharply with Pauline Puyat's Eurocentric fixation on rigid norms; her mocking "sudden croak of laughter" (67) reflects a longing for fixed Western identities. Despite Pauline's scorn, rooted in a desire for conformity, the priest's syncretic identity resonates with the parish, transcending conventional expectations and gaining the community's acceptance.

Agnes's purposeful strides, assertive arm swings and abrupt halts exemplify a deliberate performance of masculinity, marked by controlled movement and emotional restraint. These actions prove Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, where individuals enact socially sanctioned gender traits to gain legitimacy. Agnes's adherence to these directives underscores the rigid expectations that dictate gendered behaviour, pressuring individuals to conform at the expense of authentic self-expression. This enforced performance not only reinforces hegemonic masculinity but also exposes the restrictive, constructed nature of socially imposed gender identities. Through Agnes's embodiment of masculinity, Erdrich invokes the Ojibwe Two-spirit concept to challenge fixed gender roles, advocating for a fluid, inclusive understanding of identity beyond traditional binaries.

Practising gender through a set of practices never assures a complete gender identity because such an identity is always illusory. To acquire a gender to the utmost limit is quite impractical. Assuming that repeated performances reveal the essence of gender overlooks the reality that such truth is inherently elusive. Butler remarks, in her essay titled "Critically Queer", "The process of gendering, which involves "the embodying of norms", is something that is forced

upon individuals and is therefore "a compulsory practice". However, it does not completely define a person's identity. "Gender is an assignment", and individuals are expected to comply with certain norms, but they can never fully embody the ideal version of themselves that they are expected to approximate. It is important to note that this process of embodying gender is "a related process" (231), indicating its connection to other social dynamics.

Agnes makes a conscious effort to learn the preferred gender practices. She re-enacts and recreates a set of rituals that are always socially recognised and gets "stylized into gendered modes" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 191). She studies her fellow parishioners there and plans to purchase "Dr Feem's Scientific Programme of Muscular Expansion, a kit that involved a set of dumbbells, a book of directions, and one muscle tonic that promised to improve the tone of the entire upper body and another bottle that worked on the half elbow" (Erdrich 74). This is how Agnes learns to be Father Damien. It is impossible to internalise gender completely as "gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 192). As a result, Agnes sometimes feels that she is merely an intimate sister of Damien and finds Damien as a remote truth to be accomplished. She sees Damien as "loving, protective, remote and immensely disciplined" (Erdrich 77).

Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter* highlights the instability of gender designation, noting how assigning a gender is inherently precarious, as individuals can exhibit traits of any gender and may oscillate between them. This fluidity is vividly captured in Louise Erdrich's portrayal of Agnes De Witt's transformation into Father Damien, where masculinity gradually overtakes her behaviour and gestures despite her female physiology and heterosexual orientation. Agnes experiences transsexual shifts as well, praying for relief from her menstrual cycle, which soon subsides: "the cloth that she buried deep in snow... barely spotted with darkness" (Erdrich 78). Yet, this shift brings a sense of loss and ambiguity, as Agnes feels "a pang, a loss, an eerie rocking between the genders" (78). Her longing intensifies in moments of confusion over her identity and orientation, capturing an internal duality that disrupts fixed gender roles. Even as Damien, certain "feminine" instincts persist, such as a maternal tenderness when holding newborns, despite the character's conscious efforts to maintain a masculine role. This duality complicates the portrayal of gender, suggesting that traditional expectations fall short of encompassing the fluid, layered experiences of figures like Damien/Agnes, and prompting reflection on how gender, desire, and societal roles are intertwined.

This blending becomes particularly evident during their routine prayers, where "Agnes and Damien became that one person who addressed the unknown". Here, we see Damien's ambition to convert the tribal leader Nanapush to Catholicism, seeking a resolution "for the seething factions [to] merge and dissolve their problems" (182). While Damien portrays himself as an earnest servant of God, Agnes simultaneously seeks to embrace Ojibwe language and spirituality, highlighting a shared spiritual quest that ultimately leads to their disintegration during prayer. Erdrich captures this fragmentation when she writes:

> Disintegrated into pieces of creation, which God might pick up and turn curiously this way and that to catch the light. What a relief it [is], for those moments, to be nothing, a smashed thing, and to have no thought for expectation. Whether God [picks up] the fragments and stuck them back together, or casually swept them aside [is] of no consequence either to Agnes or Father Damien (183).

The emotional turmoil experienced by Damien, particularly following his breakup with Father Greggory Wekkle, culminates in a suicide attempt involving sleep-inducing herbs and opium. This act transcends mere personal crisis; it reflects the oppressive societal and religious expectations that shape and constrict identity. Such expectations, rooted in traditional rigid norms of masculinity and clerical roles, impose significant psychological burdens, driving individuals

toward despair. Damien's drastic response reveals the destructive potential of these conventions, showing how societal pressures can distort one's sense of self and lead to catastrophic outcomes.

The novel invites an examination of institutional beliefs that prioritize conformity over authenticity, emphasizing the urgent need for a more compassionate understanding of identity and mental health. Damien's recovery through a transformative sweat lodge ceremony, facilitated by Nanapush, marks a critical intersection of Indigenous healing practices and contemporary struggles with mental health. This process exemplifies the healing potential of Indigenous traditions, which emphasize holistic approaches integrating spiritual, mental, and physical well-being. Erdrich's portrayal prompts a re-evaluation of traditional healing practices, advocating for Indigenous perspectives that honour the complexities of identity and the community's vital role in recovery. By doing so, the narrative challenges dominant paradigms and underscores the importance of embracing diverse healing methodologies as essential components of the human experience, while engaging with pressing questions of gender politics and identity.

Mary Kashpaw's observations during Damien's recovery further challenge the binary understanding of gender. She recognizes that he is not simply a man but a "woman-man", reflecting a cultural acceptance that aligns with the Ojibwe recognition of Two-spirit identities as spiritual healers. As noted in *Queer Terminology—from A to Q*, Two-spirit individuals are esteemed as "healers, mediators and warriors" (Qmunity 32). However, the pressure to conform to societal norms becomes evident when Sister Hildegarde visits Damien, prompting Mary to conceal Damien's gender identity. This necessity to hide Damien's true self underscores the shame associated with indefinite gender within the Catholic framework, revealing how institutional religion imposes constraints on individual identity. Erdrich's narrative critiques rigid gender roles and restrictive religious frameworks, advocating for a more fluid and culturally significant understanding of identity.

Father Gregory Wekkle has always loved Damien's "female masculinity" (Halberstam 5). His guilt over his relationship with Damien highlights the clash between Western religious values and Indigenous views on gender and sexuality. Gregory's assertion of sin— "We've sinned . . . committed the sin of Sodom" (204)—reflects a rigid Catholic morality that condemns same-sex relationships. In contrast, Damien embraces an Ojibwe perspective, viewing sexuality as a creative act free from moral constraints. This contrast underscores the ethical confusion arising from Gregory's devout Catholicism versus Damien's syncretic faith, which merges Catholic beliefs with Indigenous spirituality. This divergence challenges the oppressive nature of conventional moral frameworks, advocating for a broader understanding of identity that recognizes the richness and fluidity of human experience.

The Catholic Church's stance on gender nonconformity and diverse sexual orientations deems them unnatural and sinful, grounded in a rigid binary understanding of gender. This is evident in the 2016 essay "Brief Statement on Transgenderism", published by The National Catholic Bioethics Centre (NCBC), which rejects gender fluidity, asserting that "gender transitioning" contradicts "the nature of the human person" (600). Similarly, the 2019 memorandum "Male and Female He Created Them", issued by the Congregation of Catholic Education, reinforces the binary framework, dismissing identities like intersex, transsexual and transgender. It frames masculinity and femininity as mutually exclusive and condemns queer identities as "people who move away from nature" and those with "a confused concept of freedom" (11). This doctrinal perspective restricts the understanding of gender and contributes to the marginalization of non-binary individuals.

The prospect of going back to the feminine identity threatens to strip Damien of the privileges associated with his masculinity, rendering such a return unacceptable. Instead, he embraces his evolving identity, reflecting on the complexities of existence by stating, "Look at all the great mix-ups, messes, confinements, and double-dealings in Shakespeare... Identities disguise

continually in a combative dance of illusion and discovery" (199). This assertion underscores the political aspects of gender fluidity, illustrating the tension between societal norms and individual identity. Damien's journey reveals how traditional structures can stifle authentic self-expression while emphasizing the potential for resilience and self-acceptance in the face of societal pressures. The contrasting views of Gregory and Damien critique rigid gender norms and the moral frameworks that uphold them.

Gregory's perception of Damien reflects a simplistic view of gender as binary; he acknowledges, "Practice had perfected her masculine ease" (301), suggesting a recognition of fluidity in Damien's identity. But, as Damien evolves, Gregory struggles to reconcile this change, perceiving him as "completely deviant from the norm" (302). This shift in perception leads to feelings of isolation for Damien, intensified by Gregory's condescending behaviour. He refers to him as "somehow less" (303), which underscores the ingrained biases that often accompany traditional gender norms.

The tension between Gregory and Damien underscores the intersection of personal and political dimensions of gender fluidity, illustrating how societal expectations influence interpersonal interactions. Gregory's discomfort with Damien's gender identity leads to a sense of exclusion for Damien, illustrating how traditional structures marginalize individuals who challenge binary classifications. Gregory's condescending tone, described as "an indulgent tone" (303), exemplifies the biased attitudes that undermine individuals who do not conform to conventional gender norms. This dynamic not only highlights the personal struggles of figures like Damien but also critiques the broader societal systems that rigidly enforce gender identities, calling for a more inclusive and fluid understanding of gender.

Nanapush acknowledges Damien's non-binary gender identity but observes the emotional distress and fear Damien experiences when asked about it. Despite attempting to remain composed, Damien's tears betray his internal conflict with the limitations of his emerging identity. Nanapush's casual inquiry, "Are you a female Wishkob?" serves to underscore the fluidity of gender, challenging fixed categories. By asserting that "Your spirits must be very powerful to such a sacrifice" (230-232), Nanapush reframes Damien's struggle not as a weakness but as a testament to the strength and spiritual guidance that shapes his Two-spirit identity, suggesting that the fluidity of Damien's identity holds transformative power.

While the Ojibwe community honours Damien as a Two-spirit, showing respect for diverse identities, Catholic characters like Pauline Puyat and Father Gregory Wekkle view his cross-gender performance as disgraceful, showcasing the imposition of colonial values that devalue non-binary identities. Damien's initial embarrassment about his queer identity underscores the struggle against societal pressures, revealing a 'closeted' existence due to fear of rejection. Still, his acceptance among the Ojibwe highlights a reclamation of identity that challenges colonial binaries. As Damien approaches death, his desire to be recognized as a woman-man instead of risking exposure to his assigned gender at birth highlights the tension between personal identity and societal perception. Damien expresses his dread of being "prodded, poked, and marveled at when dead" (342), highlighting his anxiety about societal scrutiny and the complexities surrounding his identity as he confronts his death.

Although Damien was born to white parents, he deeply identifies with Ojibwe culture, adopting their language, traditions and practices during his fifty-year tenure as a spiritual leader. Despite his initial mission to spread Catholicism, Damien immerses himself in Ojibwe life and spirituality. His successful integration into the community, however, is always accompanied by a profound fear of exposure—the dread of being disrobed and forced to reveal his birth gender. This fear underscores the inherent tension in his identity, reflecting the broader complexities of gender representation.

Erdrich presents Damien as an "articulated" product of two opposing cultures, revealing how his indigeneity is constantly challenged by Catholicism, a system he resists rather than submits to. His identity embodies a dynamic interplay of cross-cultural and cross-gender interactions, illustrating the fluidity of gender itself. James Clifford, in "Indigenous Articulations", asserts that Native people should be viewed as "indigenously articulated", suggesting that their identities are complex and relational (54). This perspective highlights that identity is not a static essence but a product of continuous interaction among cultural influences, power dynamics and personal agency. Clifford further explains that articulation involves the negotiation of "consensus" and the formation of "alliances" as well as the acknowledgement of dissent and exclusion within cultural systems (54).

Damien's experience exemplifies these dynamics, as he navigates relationships across diverse cultural contexts while grappling with his own multifaceted identity. His identity critiques Eurocentric notions of gender by emphasizing the need to re-evaluate identity through the lens of Indigenous experience. By positioning storytelling as a form of Indigenous resistance, Louise Erdrich not only politicizes gender but also highlights the agency of characters like Damien in challenging and reshaping societal norms.

Conclusion

Louise Erdrich's *Last Report* critiques the rigid gender binaries perpetuated by Eurocentric traditions while simultaneously honouring the fluid identities embraced within the Ojibwe community. Through the character of Father Damien, Erdrich illustrates the profound impact of colonial values on individual identity, revealing how societal expectations can alienate those who challenge normative classifications. By positioning storytelling as a means of Indigenous resistance, she underscores the necessity of re-evaluating gender through Indigenous epistemologies, demonstrating that identity is a dynamic process shaped by cultural interactions and personal agency. This narrative resonates with the broader themes of contemporary Native American literature, which seeks to problematize the relationship between colonial structures and Indigenous identities.

In short, Erdrich advocates for a more inclusive understanding of gender that acknowledges the multiplicity of identities and their stories, urging a confrontation of Eurocentric ideologies that seek to marginalize non-binary experiences. Here, the novel aligns with Gerald Vizenor's concept of Survivance, which emphasizes not just survival but the active resistance against colonial narratives that seek to erase Indigenous identity. Erdrich's work contributes to the ongoing dialogue about resistance and resilience in the face of historical oppression, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and valuing Indigenous voices within the literary landscape.

As contemporary divisions and separatist ideologies escalate, there is a pressing need to advocate for a politics of identity negotiation that addresses the ongoing struggles of marginalized populations. Bridging cultural divides is not merely an ideal; it is a critical requirement for building a unified and resilient society. This study underlines the power of Indigenous storytelling to reclaim agency and foster an understanding of identity that is rich, diverse and deeply rooted in cultural heritage. By embracing an inclusivist approach, society can move toward a more equitable future that honours the complexities of all identities and their nuanced experiences.

Notes

1. Ojibwe is a Native American tribe, also known as Chippewa and Anishnaabe people.
2. A trickster is a figure who uses wit and mischief to refute authority and norms and reveal hidden truths, in Native American traditions.
3. A sweat lodge ceremony is a traditional Indigenous ritual where people gather in a heated, enclosed space to pray, cleanse themselves, and connect with each other. They use steam and heat from hot stones, often guided by a spiritual leader.

4. Female Masculinity is a critical term introduced by American Queer theorist Judith Halberstam in her *Female Masculinity* (1998), which describes the expression of masculine traits by women or gender non-conforming individuals, challenging conventional gender norms and binaries.

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