

Animating the Land: Native American Spirituality, Identity and the Struggle for Sovereignty in Contemporary Literature

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate relationship between Native American identity and the land, emphasising the spiritual, cultural and communal dimensions of this bond. Rooted in Indigenous cosmologies that view land, animals, plants and spirits as interconnected components of a shared identity, the study highlights how land-based identity fosters reciprocal respect and stewardship. Drawing on Anibal Quijano's theory of decoloniality and Leanne Simpson's concept of 'land as pedagogy', the paper situates Indigenous struggles over land, tradition and identity within ongoing processes of colonial power that seek to commodify and erase Indigenous epistemologies. The paper focuses on the Native American Chippewa author Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, throwing light on the character Father Damien Modeste, whose spiritual journey from Catholic missionary to an embrace of Native animism and cultural hybridity symbolises broader decolonial struggles for sovereignty and cultural survival. The study argues that reclaiming land is both a political and deeply spiritual act for Indigenous communities, constituting an essential process of decolonial resistance and identity restoration amid colonial attempts to sever these vital connections.

Keywords: *Indigeneity, Animism, Decoloniality, Syncretism, Ecology*

Introduction

Native American identity is closely tied to the land and environment, embodying a profound relationship that transcends mere geography to encompass spiritual, cultural, and communal dimensions. For Indigenous people, the land is not a commodity but a living entity, a source of life, memory and identity that shapes their worldview and sustains their traditions. This connection fosters a land-based identity rooted in reciprocal respect, stewardship and sacred kinship with nature. However, centuries of colonial intrusion have sought to disrupt this relationship through forced land dispossession, cultural erasure and religious conversion, leading to ongoing struggles for sovereignty, self-determination and cultural survival. The fight to reclaim land is not only political but deeply spiritual, as Indigenous communities resist the commodification of their territories and assert the land as a vital foundation of their identity and continuity. This paper examines how Native American identity is shaped through an enduring bond with the environment, the spiritual significance of land, and the resistance to colonial

forces seeking to sever these essential ties, as represented in Native American Chippewa writer Louise Erdrich's novel *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001). The paper focuses on Father Damien Modeste, whose transition from Catholic missionary to embracing Native animism reflects broader struggles for decolonial sovereignty and cultural survival. It also inspects how the reclamation of native epistemologies serves as a tool for decoloniality.

In Indigenous literature, the themes of land, identity and struggle are profoundly entwined, forming the backbone of Native American spiritual, cultural and political life. One foundational concept in Native American cosmology is the 'notion of extended self,' which serves as the basis of their spirituality. The human self is not conceived as autonomous or separate; rather, it is deeply interconnected with animals, spirits and the natural world. The intrinsic relationship with animals and the environment arises from this foundational interconnection. Each Native individual is affiliated with a clan that is associated with a totem animal, thereby affirming a collective identity that is deeply rooted in ecological and spiritual kinship. As Joy Porter upholds, there exists an "interconnectedness and relationship between all things, between animals, land, peoples," along with a profound need "to seek individual, communal and environmental balance" (43). This viewpoint blurs the lines that separate humans from non-humans, as well as the spiritual from the physical. Both animals and plants are recognised as members of their respective communities, each possessing a spiritual essence. Consequently, the land, animals, plants, spirits and community are interconnected elements rather than isolated entities, forming a collective identity.

Quijano's Decoloniality and Simpson's Land Pedagogy: Recovering Epistemologies

Anibal Quijano's theory of coloniality of power provides a critical lens to understand the persistent effects of colonialism on Native American identity and their connection to land. Quijano, in "Coloniality, Modernity/Rationality," argues that colonialism did not end with political independence but continues to exert power through enduring structures that define knowledge, identity and social hierarchies according to Eurocentric norms. This coloniality manifests as the ongoing marginalisation and dispossession of Indigenous peoples, particularly through the commodification and alienation of their ancestral lands. Quijano emphasises the need for an epistemological decolonisation—a dismantling of the Eurocentric model of knowledge production that has dominated global thought systems since the onset of colonial modernity. He critiques the Western paradigm of rationality and totality, arguing that while the West developed a version of totality that led to theoretical reductionism and oppressive universalisms, non-Western cultures possess their own holistic systems of knowledge that value diversity, contradiction and heterogeneity without resorting to domination. He writes:

It is necessary to extricate oneself from the linkages between rationality/modernity and coloniality. . . . First of all, epistemological decolonization, as decoloniality, is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, as the basis of another rationality which may legitimately pretend to some universality. (33)

This 'other rationality' resists the imposition of Western universalism, instead advocating intercultural exchange, pluriversality and cognitive justice. Quijano calls for the

freedom of all peoples to produce, critique and transform their knowledge systems, as part of a broader social liberation from structures of inequality and domination.

In this framework, Indigenous struggles for land reclamation and cultural survival are not merely political battles over territory but deeply epistemic and ontological fights to dismantle colonial power and revive Indigenous ways of being and knowing. For Native communities, land is more than property; it is a living, sacred entity integral to their collective identity and cosmology. Quijano's concept of decoloniality—the active process of unlearning colonial frameworks and re-centring Indigenous epistemologies—resonates strongly with the Native American resistance to colonial encroachment, as they seek to restore their spiritual and material relationships with the environment.

Leanne Simpson advocates for decolonising academia by incorporating Indigenous epistemologies. She envisages a resurgence of Indigenous intellectual systems and a reclamation of the context within which those systems operate, goes much further to propelling our nationhood and reestablishing Indigenous political systems because it places people back on the land in a context that is conducive to resurgence and mobilization." (22)

Simpson powerfully critiques the academy's persistent refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy and ethical rigour of ¹Nishnaabeg intelligence. She argues that rather than seeking validation from colonial institutions, Indigenous peoples must enact their intellectual resurgence outside the constraints of the "academic industrial complex." (23). Simpson emphasises that genuine decolonial efforts demand more than superficial adjustments; they call for a profound and collective upheaval of entrenched colonial structures. Rather than seeking to revise existing systems, decolonial scholars, artists and activists must engage in acts of relational resistance and shared commitment aimed at dismantling the very foundations of colonial thought and power, paving the way for emancipatory alternatives. She insists that if the academy truly seeks to support Indigenous thought, it must move beyond symbolic inclusion and actively participate in dismantling settler colonialism by protecting "the source of our knowledge—Indigenous land." (23)

Land dispossession is intertwined with efforts to erase Native identities and sever their ecological and spiritual ties. Quijano's and Simpson's ideas deepen our understanding of the Native American fight for sovereignty as a comprehensive struggle for epistemic justice and cultural survival, challenging the imposed colonial narratives that have historically defined land and identity in reductive terms. Through this lens, Native American literature and activism become acts of decolonisation, affirming land not only as a physical space but as the vital foundation of Indigenous identity and continuity.

The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse becomes an essential arena where these struggles for land and identity are vividly represented. It offers nuanced portrayals of the spiritual and cultural hybridity that arises from colonial encounters, echoing the call for epistemological decolonisation. Through characters who grapple with their identities and relationships to land, Erdrich weaves narratives that resist colonial frameworks and assert the centrality of Indigenous worldviews.

¹ Anishinaabe people; can be translated as original people.

This narrative examines the impact of missionary activities, government land allocations and efforts at religious conversion on the Ojibwe community. Such external influences contribute to the fragmentation of Ojibwe identity and disconnect them from their ancestral lands. Louise Erdrich deepens this investigation of spiritual and cultural intermingling through the character of Father Damien Modeste, initially known as Agnes De Witt—a nun who eventually transitions to a Catholic priest serving the reservation. In Father Damien's farewell letter of confession addressed to the Pope, he reveals not only his adopted persona but also the intricacies of his spiritual evolution. Initially a missionary focused on conversion, Damien experiences a significant internal conflict after extensive engagement with Ojibwe culture, particularly under the mentorship of the tribal chief Nanapush. His growing familiarity with Native spirituality and land-based animism increasingly challenges and displaces his Euro-Christian beliefs. The novel traces his journey from a rigid follower of Catholic doctrine to one who embraces Native American animism and ceremonialism, arriving at a point of religious syncretism, ecological consciousness and cultural hybridity.

Through the epistolary form, Erdrich maps not only Father Damien's personal conflict but also a larger cultural, spiritual and religious struggle—the attempt of Indigenous communities to reclaim agency, identity and land. Damien writes of his grief at not receiving any responses from the Vatican, reflecting institutional neglect. He also challenges Catholic rules by breaking “the seal Christ had set on words spoken in that box . . . to a higher confessor” (5) to expose the sins of Sister Leopolda. This act, while sacrilegious by church standards, is framed in the narrative as an ethical imperative aligned with Ojibwe values of justice and community.

In addition, Damien's adoption into the Nanapush family signifies a profound transformation and the emergence of a hybrid identity that is intricately connected to the land itself. His acknowledgement of being adopted by the Nanapush family, a tribal lineage and his subsequent affiliation with the Ojibwe community serves not only as a personal commitment but also as a representation of the symbolic renewal of cross-cultural kinship, firmly anchored in a land-based identity.

Father Damien's transformation, influenced by his increasing closeness to Ojibwe cosmology, reflects a profound realignment of religious and cultural identity. His initial prejudice—mirrored in Agnes De Witt's dismissal of the Ojibwe as “God's doomed creatures” (37)—eventually yields to reverence for Indigenous land and spirituality. After spending significant time with the Ojibwe community and their vital traditions, Damien transforms his previous resentment and becomes a spiritual connector between Catholicism and Native American land-based spiritual practices. His effort to translate the Catechism into the Ojibwe language goes beyond simple missionary work; it represents a meaningful exchange of cultures. In doing so, he participates in a dynamic exchange of belief systems, affirming that “the ordinary as well as esoteric forms of worship engaged in by the Ojibwe are sound, even compatible with the teachings of Christ” (49). This recognition of Indigenous spirituality as “compatible” signals a movement toward religious syncretism—an acknowledgement that sacred connections to land and spirits cannot be erased through colonial theology but must be engaged on equal terms.

The novel demonstrates how spiritual identity is forged not in isolation but in ongoing dialogue with place and people. The Ojibwe's resistance is intricately tied to their spiritual bond with the land. Native figures Fleur Pillager and Nanapush, living on the margins of settlement,

maintain sacred rituals in isolation. When Damien approaches them in the woods, he confronts not merely a pair of individuals, but a sacred land haunted by memory and loss. The description of Fleur and Nanapush— “shells made of loss, made of transparent flint, made of whispers in the oak leaves, voices of the dead” (80) — marks a turning point. In this scene, Damien encounters a form of identity that is neither fully legible to the settler gaze nor fully assimilable to Catholic doctrine. Fleur’s disdain for the priests, who had once brought sickness “in the hems of their black gowns” (81), is both literal and symbolic, marking the trauma of colonial contact. These black gowns carried more than water for baptism; they carried the weight of cultural extinction.

Yet, in the oral tradition of Nanapush, resistance flourishes. His stories are not just cultural artefacts but strategies of survival. Through narrative, he preserves knowledge systems tied to land, spirits and community. As Johnpaul Jones argues in “The Land Has Memory”, “There is no place without a story. Every plant, every animal, every rock and flowing spring carries a message” (1). Stories link generations, encode ecological wisdom, and affirm Indigenous sovereignty. The Ojibwe relationship to land, as Jones argues, is rooted in kinship: “Native peoples have an extraordinary relationship with the land and the world around them that stems from the broadest sense of kinship with all life” (2). Whether they build, farm or hunt, these acts are done with ceremony, consent, and gratitude. “They perform ceremonies to mark each season and give thanks for what the earth has provided” (3). Such practices are more than rituals — they are acts of resistance against capitalist commodification of land.

The theme of commodification reemerges with particular force in the section where the government and religious authorities encourage the privatisation of land. Native communities, once holding land in collective spiritual trust, are coerced into selling parcels under economic duress. This enforced alienation of land fractures Ojibwe identity. The missionaries, under the guise of religious salvation, contribute to this dislocation. “Into this complex situation walk[s] Father Damien, with only the vaguest notion of how the ownership of land related to the soul” (Erdrich 76). While Damien does not initially understand the spiritual stakes of land dispossession, his evolving awareness reflects Erdrich’s broader commentary on the colonial misunderstanding of Indigenous cosmology.

For Ojibwe leaders like Nanapush, land is not a commodity but a sacred inheritance. His resistance is linguistic, spiritual and cultural. Though his name appears in the baptism register, he never relinquishes his beliefs. When Damien visits him, he is overcome by the strange atmosphere—the woods alive with voices, shrieking and laughter, filled with the invisible presence of ancestors. The moment marks a confrontation between the colonial archive—the baptismal record—and the living archive of Indigenous memory and resistance. Nanapush and Fleur, surrounded by spirits, are visualised not as primitive or demonic, but as figures of endurance, embodiments of a landscape steeped in ancestral presence.

Through layered portrayals, Erdrich critiques the colonial project of cultural homogenisation. The spiritual life of the Ojibwe—expressed through sweat lodges, drumming, medicine bundles and oral tales—resists flattening. It offers a different ontology, one where identity is shaped by land, memory and collective story. In the novel, the landscape is not a backdrop but a co-narrator. It shelters spirits, remembers violence and echoes with laughter and lament. And in this sacred geography, characters like Nanapush and Damien must navigate their conflicting loyalties, evolving beliefs and enduring ties to the land.

Father Damien's experience in the sweat lodge, under the guidance of Nanapush, reveals a deeper engagement with Native spiritual traditions. Despite being a representative of Catholicism, Damien begins to recognise the sweat lodge as a sacred space. For the Ojibwe, the sweat lodge is 'church' in its own right. It represents a womb-like enclosure symbolising the earth, and the healing smoke serves both physical and spiritual purposes. Though Damien initially arrives at Little No Horse to "help, assist, comfort and aid, spiritually sustain, and advise the Anishinaabeg," it is Nanapush who provides him spiritual comfort in return (214). In a moment of profound humility, Father Damien accepts this reversal of roles. Nanapush lights a pipe, blows smoke over Damien and conducts the healing rite: "With his pipe lighted, blowing the smoke over Father Damien in a faint and fragrant drift" (214). This ritual act reinforces the Ojibwe belief that healing, prayer, and the earth are interwoven. When Father Damien lies in the lodge, surrounded by heat, water, air, and the shape of the earth, he feels part of a spiritual whole: "close upon earth and intimate with fire, with water, with the heated air that cleaned their lungs, with the earth below, and with the eagle's nest of the sweat lodge over him" (215). Through this embodied, immersive experience, he gains a tactile understanding of Ojibwe religiosity, challenging the rigidity of Catholic worship spaces.

This moment in the sweat lodge exemplifies how Ojibwe spirituality emerges from an intimate, reciprocal relationship with the land. Unlike European religious systems, which often position God above and beyond, Ojibwe cosmology locates spiritual presence within the land. Louise Erdrich, through Father Damien's transformation, illustrates how indigenous identity is deeply rooted in rituals that honour both land and spirit. Damien's healing is not just physical; it is epistemological – he begins to learn through the land.

Erdrich employs multiple symbolic episodes to convey indigenous values and challenge colonial impositions. When Damien rediscovers his piano skills, animals, particularly snakes, crawl towards the church, drawn by the music. While others fear the spectacle, Nanapush interprets it as sacred: the snake is "a deeply intelligent secretive being," and "the great snake, wrapped around the centre of the earth, who kept things from flying apart" (220). The snake, as spirit, becomes a metaphor for subterranean indigenous wisdom. Father Damien, formerly repulsed by the snake as a Christian symbol of sin, begins to see it as a guardian spirit: "he had acquired a very powerful guardian spirit" (220). These cross-cultural meanings associated with the same natural element demonstrate Erdrich's commitment to religious syncretism, not to obliterate one system in favour of another but to show their simultaneous and contested coexistence.

Father Damien's position within this hybrid cultural landscape is further challenged when he opposes the canonisation of Sister Leopolda. While the Catholic Church valorises her miracles, Damien critiques her violence and religious perversion. He accuses her of murdering Napoleon and corrupting the Kashpaws, pointing out her "complicated love for Catholicism" (238). In contrast to the rigid religiosity represented by Leopolda, Damien's spirituality is fluid, rooted in compassion and understanding. When asked to convert as redemption, Damien boldly replies, "Oh no, I believe we were wrong" (239). His conviction stems from years of living with and learning from the Ojibwe—listening to their stories, observing their ceremonies and witnessing their resilience. For Damien, the role of a priest is redefined: not to convert or colonise but to mediate, care and learn.

The hybridity of Father Damien's identity and belief system reflects the broader thematic concern of Erdrich's work. As James Ruppert notes in *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*, the Native writer occupies a space between two audiences – "non-Native and Native American" – and must negotiate multiple cultural codes (15). Ruppert insists that Native writers do not merely "stand between two cultures" but actively "utilise the different cultural codes simultaneously" to generate meaning and critique (15). Erdrich exemplifies this mediational position in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. Her work does not simply juxtapose Catholicism and land-based Ojibwe belief systems; instead, it explores their entangled negotiations within lived experience.

James Clifford, in *The Predicament of Culture*, argues that indigeneity is not a fixed remnant of the past but a dynamic articulation, shaped by the pressures and interactions of history, politics and social change. In Erdrich, identity is performative, strategic and, above all, responsive. Cultural hybridity – far from being a dilution of tradition – is portrayed as a vital means of survival and resistance. Characters like Father Damien and Nanapush embody this hybridity. Damien's priesthood is not invalidated by his gender performance or his openness to Ojibwe practices; rather, his capacity for empathy and adaptability makes him an agent of spiritual mediation. Nanapush, too, resists erasure not by isolating himself from external influences, but by strategically adopting, rejecting, or retelling what serves his community.

This negotiation is particularly visible in Nanapush's storytelling. His tale about Nanabozho converting wolves and foxes to Christianity satirises colonial missionary activity. Nanabozho fools the animals, telling them, "if you take on this religion, no one can kill you" (84), and feeds them poisoned pellets to obtain their fur, which he then uses to repay the French trader. This allegory critiques the false promises and exploitative tactics of colonial religion. Damien protests, asserting that "the Anishinaabeg" are not as gullible as the animals and that he would never "skin them to pay his debts" (85). Yet the very need for this reassurance highlights the violence inherent in the colonial mission, no matter how benevolent it may appear on the surface.

The battle for Indigenous identity is not waged solely through overt resistance to colonising forces but also through the subversive act of storytelling. Stories, for the Ojibwe, are epistemological tools – they preserve knowledge, history, and spiritual codes. As Johnpaul Jones observes in *The Land Has Memory*, "There is no place without a story. Every plant, every animal, every rock and flowing spring carries a message" (1). Stories anchor people to the land, carry generational wisdom, and articulate relationships with the non-human world. They are, in Clifford's terms, a means of articulating indigeneity in a globalised world. Through Nanapush's tales and Fleur's silences, through the symbolic acts of rituals and ceremonies, Ojibwe characters assert their belonging to a land continually under threat.

Erdrich's project in the novel is both political and poetic. It critiques the colonial mechanisms that try to erase Indigenous connections to the land. The privatisation of territory, the institutionalisation of religion, and the denigration of Native healing practices all serve to sever Native peoples from their spiritual geographies. The entry of businesspeople, missionaries and cheats disrupts traditional lifeways. "Into this complex situation walk[s] Father Damien, with only the vaguest notion of how the ownership of land related to the soul" (Erdrich 76). As

Damien learns, land is not property – it is presence, spirit, and narrative. His growing awareness of this truth positions him as both participant and observer in a complex intercultural dialogue.

Environmental consciousness is not framed in modern conservationist terms but emerges through an Indigenous cosmology that sees land as animate, relational, and sacred. Damien's growing awareness of the land's spiritual dimension—its seasons, its silences, its sufferings—mirrors his inner transformation and decolonial awakening. His bond with the environment deepens not through domination or detachment, but through attentive presence and ethical engagement. Nanapush and Fleur, too, articulate their resistance not through armed rebellion but by aligning themselves with the rhythms of the earth—trapping, healing, farming and dreaming in ways that affirm continuity with ancestral wisdom. In this context, environmental stewardship is inseparable from cultural survival. The novel thus positions land not only as a contested political resource but as a spiritual geography that sustains Indigenous worldviews. Reclaiming the land, therefore, becomes an act of environmental re-inscription and ontological recovery—a reclaiming of narrative space where Indigenous voices, values and ecosystems coexist in mutual reciprocity.

Conclusion

Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* offers a profound meditation on Indigenous identity as inextricably tied to the land—conceived not as property, but as a living presence imbued with memory, spirit, and healing. Through the spiritual journey of Father Damien and the enduring resilience of characters like Nanapush and Fleur, Erdrich reveals how colonial forces—land dispossession, religious conversion, and cultural marginalisation—sought to sever Native peoples from their ancestral geographies. Yet, rather than framing Indigeneity as a nostalgic loss, Erdrich presents it as a dynamic, adaptive force that continually reshapes itself through ritual, storytelling and lived experience. This reclamation of land-based identity emerges as an act of epistemological resistance. As theorists like Anibal Quijano and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argue, decoloniality requires dismantling colonial systems of knowledge and power, and restoring Indigenous frameworks rooted in reciprocity, relationality and land. Erdrich enacts this vision through Father Damien's transformation—not as a figure of conversion, but as one converted by the land itself. In embracing Ojibwe cosmology, he embodies the possibility of intercultural understanding grounded in humility and spiritual harmony. In short, Erdrich's novel becomes a literary act of decolonisation—where memory, ceremony and narrative resist colonial erasure and reassert Indigenous sovereignty. As James Clifford and Johnpaul Jones remind us, indigeneity is not a fixed essence but a continuing act of survival and reinvention. In giving voice to that process, Erdrich reclaims the land not only as a physical space, but as a sacred ground of cultural continuity, spiritual resilience and political resistance.

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