

## **GENRE RECONSIDERED IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE ROUND HOUSE***

AITOR IBARROLA-ARMENDÁRIZ

*Universidad de Deusto*

*aitor.ibarrola@deusto.es*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article discusses the significant shift in terms of genre to be observed in Louise Erdrich's fourteenth novel, *The Round House* (2012). This novel, which explores the effects of a sexual assault on an Ojibwe reservation, can be seen to use narrative styles and generic conventions that are quite different from those found in Erdrich's earlier works. The article considers the possible reasons that could explain Erdrich's decision to hybridize different genres (coming-of-age, thriller, etc.) in *The Round House* and how that decision may have conditioned the reception of the novel among Native and non-Indian readers alike. A number of socio-cultural and rhetorical theories of genre (Miller, Bitzer, Bakhtin) are used to discern the author's logic in opting for a specific blend of literary genres. The article concludes that Erdrich's generic choices are best understood in the light of the socio-political urgency and activism that the vulnerable situation of Native women on reservations demands.

### **RESUMEN**

El presente artículo estudia el notable giro de género literario que se observa en *The Round House* (2012), la decimocuarta novela de Louise Erdrich. Esta obra, que muestra los efectos que la violación de una mujer tiene en una tribu ojibwa, utiliza estilos narrativos y convenciones de género distintas de las habituales en novelas anteriores de Erdrich. Este trabajo analiza los posibles motivos que pudieran explicar la decisión de la autora de combinar distintos géneros (novela de aprendizaje, de suspense, etc.) en la obra y cómo

esa decisión ha condicionado la recepción de la misma entre distintos lectores. Se recurre a varias teorías retóricas y socio-culturales del género literario (Miller, Bitzer, Bakhtin) para intentar discernir las razones de Erdrich para elegir esa mezcla de géneros. El artículo concluye que para comprender la decisión de la autora con respecto al género habría que tener en cuenta la urgencia y el grado de compromiso que la situación vulnerable de las mujeres nativas en las reservas indias requiere.

*Each new novel by an American Indian who is consciously concerned with the principles of continuity that lie at the heart of tribal life is another step in developing a new type of American novel, one that relates directly to the oldest aesthetic traditions of the Western Hemisphere.*

Elaine Jahner, "A Critical Approach to American Indian Literature"

*I will be arguing that a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish. To do so, I will examine the connection between genre and recurrent situation and the way in which genre can be said to represent typified rhetorical action.*

Carolyn R. Miller, "Genre as Social Action"

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Countless Native American writers and scholars—Gerald Vizenor, Leslie M. Silko, Paula G. Allen, and Craig Womack, to mention a few—have complained that we, Western readers, are inclined to fit or classify Native works of artistic expression into literary genres and categories that do not necessarily do justice to the worldviews, formal complexity, and objectives present in those works. Allen, for example, remarked in the opening paragraphs of "The Sacred Hoop" that "The study of non-Western literature poses a problem for Western readers who naturally tend to see alien literature in terms that are familiar to them, however irrelevant those terms may be to the literature under consideration." (3). Truly, as she moved on to show, underlying the apparent diversity of American

Indian literatures, there is “a unity and harmony of symbol, structure, and articulation that is peculiar to the American Indian world” (21) and that is not easily grasped by outsiders. As a result, argues Vizenor, “Native American Indian literatures have been pressed into cultural categories, transmuted by reductionism, animadversions and the hyperrealities of neo-colonial consumerism” (5). Regardless of whether the pigeonholing of Native American literary works into convenient categories and reductive descriptions has been intentional or not, what seems unquestionable is that they have given rise to all sorts of what Vizenor calls “pleasurable misreadings” (5).

Nowhere does this become clearer than in the use given by literary scholars to generic categories such as the epic song, autobiography or the novel, which are employed to guide both the production and the interpretation of literary works. Of course, one of the key functions served by generic expectations, conventions, and constraints is precisely to help us organize and catalogue artifacts on the basis of the features—formal, contextual, and otherwise—that they display. This is probably the main reason why genre criticism has become one of the foremost branches—or methodologies—in rhetorical studies. Nevertheless, this may also be the reason why, as Krupat has argued, literary studies have lagged behind other adjacent fields, such as anthropology or history, which abandoned some decades ago their commitment “only to a full and relentless translation of the Native voice into Western terms” (9). And yet, according to this critic, it is also true that “A considerable body of work is currently accumulating [...] that is concerned to trace the difference as well as the sameness of Indian literature in relation to the Western tradition” (Krupat 9). More importantly perhaps, as Elaine Jahner explains in the first epigraph to this essay, it is not just literary scholars who are taking an interest in how the specificities of tribal worldviews and storytelling traditions can be accommodated in the literary canon, but writers themselves seem to be increasingly aware of their contribution to the development of what she refers to as “a new type of American novel” (218) that responds to different canons and literary traditions.

Chippewa writer Louise Erdrich would definitely be a case in point, since her novels have often been praised for their richly-described landscapes, immensely complicated characters, and the lyrical qualities of her voice. For many, what is most striking about her prose is her ability to retain many of the staple elements of the

Native experience and narrative tradition while, simultaneously, managing to connect with readers belonging to other cultures. In this regard, David Stirrup argues that “It is ultimately that ability to depict what many understand as ‘Chippewa experience’, while innovatively embracing ‘the European American novelistic tradition’—to successfully navigate ‘the betwixt and between’—that is at the root of her success” (3). However, despite her efforts to combine elements of continuance and transformation and “to reconcile two worlds” (Holt 160), it must be admitted that many non-Indian readers of her early works—e.g., *Love Medicine* (1984) or *Tracks* (1988)—were quite baffled by some structural and stylistic attributes that set her books apart from anything they had read before. Washburn rightly notes in her study of Erdrich’s life and works that “American Indian literature utilizes elements of orality that make it more difficult to understand for the reader used to the Euro-American narrative structure of writing” (10). As this scholar explains, it is no wonder that many readers and critics have been at a loss as to how to classify Erdrich’s fiction, since it is so deeply rooted in “tribally specific epistemologies” and a “Native American storytelling tradition” (Washburn 6) that it is difficult to apply any generic label to it. Several reputed specialists—such as Karl Kroeber, Nancy Peterson or Kathleen Sands—have claimed that in order to gain access to and truly appreciate Erdrich’s art, readers need to recognize and get acquainted with the basic dynamics of the oral tradition and the storytelling strategies on which her novels heavily rely (cf. Kroeber 76-78). In Connie Jacobs’ opinion, “The feature of her works that critics repeatedly note is the degree to which her novels replicate a traditional storytelling situation with a teller and an audience” (46) and how she succeeds in transferring the dialogic structures into a written format that makes her stories both alive and significant to contemporary readers. Sands’ and Peterson’s analyses of Erdrich’s early novels demonstrate not only her heavy debt to the tribal storytelling tradition, but also her commitment to her peoples’ survivance and the search for *mino bimaadiziwin* or the Ojibwe “good life” (Madsen 14).

Bearing in mind all the above-mentioned considerations, it is important that we pay closer attention to other aspects of Native American writing—apart from its purely formal and structural features—that may also be relevant to the study of storytelling practices and may cast new light on the writers’ decisions to opt for specific rhetorical performances. In his classic study of literary

criticism, Northrop Frye already raised a warning sign to scholars all too engrossed in the exercise of trying to classify works according to generic categories by saying that “criticism by genres” should instead help to “clarify relationships between different traditions” and to discover possible affinities between them (274). According to Frye, what is integral to generic criticism is the fact that it is rhetorical and, therefore, is radically conditioned by the interaction established between the artist and his/her reading public. While it is true that up to the late 1950s formalist approaches to literature had pervaded the critical landscape, by then a new generation of scholars had begun to employ alternative socio-cultural paradigms that put the emphasis on the literary works as responses to particular situations or as interaction with social institutions. Lloyd Bitzer argued, for instance, that “Rhetorical works belong to the class of things which obtain their character from the circumstances of the historic context in which they occur. [...] a work is rhetorical because it is a response to a situation of a certain kind” (3). Some may claim that Bitzer’s situational understanding of rhetoric does not apply to literary discourse which, it is assumed, does not seek to produce any immediate transformation in the world. Nevertheless, other critics, such as Mikhail Bakhtin or Julia Kristeva, would contend that complex genres—of which literary artworks are paradigmatic examples—inevitably respond to previous discourse and anticipate future responses, thus becoming intertextual and ideological in nature. These reflections should have special validity for writers belonging to minority groups for at least two momentous reasons: first, because, as we have noted with regard to Louise Erdrich’s fiction, they are highly dependent on a tradition that antecedes them; and, secondly, because their utterances are perceived as coming from the margins of mainstream discourse, and therefore need to struggle for new niches in the literary canon (cf. Krupat 97-98). In this sense, Carolyn Miller’s views on genre as a form of social action may prove useful since, as she puts it, “For the critic, genres can serve both as an index to cultural patterns and as tools for exploring the achievements of particular speakers and writers” (165). If genres are understood as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (Miller 159), then it is clear that they play a critical role as convenient mediators between personal perception and public expression, as well as between the singular occurrence and recurrent situations.

Louise Erdrich's fourteenth novel, *The Round House* (2012), provides us with a convenient example to illustrate how authors tend to view genre as a category of discourse typifying a certain rhetorical action that will get its meaning from recurrent situations "and from the social context in which that situation arose" (Miller 163). As the author explains in the afterword to the novel, "This book is set in 1988, but the tangle of laws that hinder prosecution of rape cases on many reservations still exists" (372), thus establishing one of her foremost motivations for writing the novel. Unlike her earlier works, many of which were set in the past, here she chooses to bring the story closer to our contemporary days and this novel zooms in on a rather ordinary, middle-class Native family living on an Ojibwe reservation. As most critics and reviewers of the novel have noted, what seems most original in *The Round House* (*RH*) is the fact that, instead of relying on her usual "rotating cast of narrators, a kind of storytelling chorus" (Russo "Disturbing"), Erdrich decides to tell most of the story from the point of view of her protagonist, Joe Coutts, a 13-year-old Native boy. The choice of a single narrative voice that is both smart and time-worn, since Joe looks back upon his childhood and the horrible crime perpetrated against his mother with both regret and affection, endows the novel with a momentum that is hard to find in Erdrich's earlier works. In addition, *RH* is structured as a thriller, a detective story in which Joe and his father struggle first to hit upon the criminal and then to take him to court, which makes it easy to follow and manages to engross the reader in a masterfully-paced plot. In an interview with author Mary Beth Keane, Erdrich stated the following regarding what inspired her to write this novel:

The immense difficulty of prosecuting crimes of sexual violence on reservations has haunted me for many years, but I didn't know how to tell the story. I wanted to write it as a suspense novel. How else to include the jurisdictional complexity? I didn't want to bore myself. When my main character, Joe, started talking, I knew I had been waiting for him. A writer's gift. (Keane "Louise Erdrich")

Naturally, it may be true that being a writer of long experience must have helped Erdrich to identify intuitively which genres and narrative conventions would best convey her message; nevertheless, it would be a bit naive not to realize that she has also strategically weighed the advantages of using particular narrative modes—and rhetorical formulae—to meet a certain socio-cultural

exigence. In Julie Tharp's words, "[Erdrich] challenges the reader to rise as a witness for tribal justice. Rooted in legal and cultural realities, Erdrich's narrative voice and style shift to proclaim the urgency of her crusade" (39). Tharp rightly argues that the more activist tone and engaging conventions in the novel help to explain both her seeming departure from her literary style—usually more lyrical—and its broad appeal for different readers. As Miller claims in the second epigraph to this article, it is quite impossible to make sensible decisions regarding genre without bearing in mind the kind of situation that the work is responding to and the type of "action it is used to accomplish" (151).

## **2. PROTOTYPICAL AND ORIGINAL ELEMENTS IN *THE ROUND HOUSE***

*The Round House* won both the National Book Award for fiction and the Minnesota Book Award in the novel category, thus enlarging the long list of prizes she has received throughout her writing career. As mentioned above, the novel focuses on a happy Native family, the Coutts, who see their lives suddenly disrupted by the brutal rape and attempted murder of the mother, Geraldine, somewhere near the ceremonial construction of the title. The story sets out with the father, Tribal Judge Antone Bazil Coutts, and his young son, Joe, the narrator of the story, working hard in their family garden, while the gruesome attack is taking place just a few miles away from their home:

Small trees had attacked my parents' house at the foundation. They were just seedlings with one or two rigid, healthy leaves. Nevertheless, the stalky shoots had managed to squeeze through knife cracks in the decorative brown shingles covering the cement blocks. They had grown into the unseen wall and it was difficult to pry them loose. My father wiped his palm across his forehead and damned their toughness. (Erdrich, *RH* 3)

The symbolism of the opening scene sets the right tone for all the afflictions and desperation that father and son will experience in trying to "pry loose" the truth of an extremely sinister story. Antone Coutts is an experienced lawyer, but he soon realizes that bringing the most likely suspects to court will not be an easy task due to the complexity of applying the law to non-Native criminals in certain

areas of the reservation: “The problem with most Indian rape cases was that even after there was an indictment the U.S. attorney often declined to take the case to trial for one reason or another. Usually a raft of bigger cases” (49). So the book can be read as a detective story in which father and son work together to try to figure out the motive and what really happened during the assault that has left Geraldine deeply traumatized and unable to convey her pain even to her closest kin. The thriller is an unusual genre for Erdrich to explore but, more than in the uncertainties surrounding the harrowing crime, the author seems much more interested in pondering the effects that the brutal event has had on the victim and her family. Joe, in particular, sees his innocent adolescent world and his inner self pulled apart by the nightmare that his mother is living through and his (and his father’s) inability to do much about it:

With all my being, I wanted to go back to before all this had happened. I wanted to enter our good-smelling kitchen again, sit down at my mother’s table before she’d struck me and before my father had forgotten my existence. I wanted to hear my mother laugh until she snorted. I wanted to move back through time and stop her from returning to her office that Sunday for those files. (93)

In a way, it could be argued that Joe’s verbal responses to the demands imposed by the troubling situation “are clearly as functional and necessary as the physical responses” (Bitzer 5). His feelings and desires carry a force in some ways more effective than any of his (or his father’s) attempts to use the law to bring the perpetrator to court (cf. Matchie 361-63). But apart from Erdrich’s foray into the territory of the popular “whodunit,” one other feature that makes *RH* different from her earlier works is the fact that most of the story is told from Joe’s point of view, looking back over the events that marked his transition from childhood into adult life. It is true that, as several analysts have pointed out (Kakutani “Ambushed”; Marszal “Round”), part of the choral quality that the inclusion of multiple points of view gave to earlier novels is lost here, since—except for a couple of interludes by other characters—it is only Joe Coutts’ voice that we hear throughout the book. Yet, as noted above, it is evident that in this book the author wants to keep us within the dire realities of contemporary life on Indian reservations and she wishes to focus very closely on the aftermath of a sexual crime that almost destroys—or, at least, deeply changes—a

happy family. Furthermore, Erdrich also tries to make the reader experience firsthand the emotional crosscurrents of the boy's inner life as he searches for answers to his mother's condition in his relationships with friends, relatives, and, above all, his much-admired—although lately distant—father. In Miller's opinion, "He [Joe] has no imaginative access to the visceral nightmare of sexual assault. Even the adult Joe, who narrates the story from some unspecified future time cannot fully grasp Geraldine's ordeal, perhaps because he can barely stand to think about it" ("Review"). Somehow, all that Joe can do is to use the conventional formulae found in coming-of-age narratives that, as Harrell and Linkugel note, "generate discourse characterized by a family of common factors" (264) and that will be automatically recognized by readers of whichever background as a response to troubling—but also formative—experiences.

Clearly, one of Erdrich's most original achievements in *RH* is to be able to combine skillfully elements of two fairly traditional literary genres: the detective story—with its hideous crime, multiple suspects, its suspense and the unexpected denouement—with other elements coming from the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, with all its tribulations and psychological apprehensions. Nevertheless, despite her incursion into these more popular fiction genres, it would be unfair to say that she has completely put aside all of the Native ingredients in her earlier novels. Even if the tone of Joe's descriptions of the environs is necessarily hazed over by his feelings of anger and impotence, as he sees his parents drifting in a sea of grief, there is still the touch of Erdrich the talented storyteller, which brings alive the tribal community and provides a note of grace in the darkest moments (see Madsen 13):

[...] I thought about my father sitting in the welling gloom downstairs, and my mother in the black bedroom with the shades drawn against tomorrow's sunrise. There was that hush on the reservation that falls between the summer dusk and dark, before the pickup trucks drag between the bars, the dance hall, and the drive-up liquor window. Sounds were muted—a horse neighed over the trees. There was a short, angry bawl way off as a child was dragged in from outdoors. There was the drone of a faraway motor chugging down from the church on the hill. (172)

In addition to her artfulness in depicting the landscapes on the reservation with great verisimilitude, and yet humaneness too,

she also manages to intermingle sections of the Ojibwe history and tradition, which have become regular constituents of her fiction. And so, while Joe spends much of his time hanging out with three friends, pinching beer and cigarettes and echoing the lines of their favorite sci-fi movie heroes, he is also involved in learning about the kinship connections, spiritual ceremonies, and animated powwow celebrations that have kept his people together. Much of the education that Joe gets concerning the Ojibwe's lore and history comes from his grandfather, Mooshum, an exceedingly old man—supposedly 112 years old—who has the peculiar habit of communicating that ancestral wisdom of the tribal ways in his sleep:

Sometime right after moonrise, for there was light in the room, I woke. Mooshum was talking alright, so I rolled over and stuck a pillow over my head. I dozed off, but something he said hooked me in, and little by little, like a fish reeled up out of the dark, I began to surface. Mooshum was not just talking in the random disconnected way people do, blurting out scraps of dream language. He was telling a story. (210)

A number of critics have remarked that one of the major strengths of the novel is its ability to juxtapose the tribal tradition and worldview that the narrator learns from his elders with the legal and moral codes that have come to prevail on most contemporary reservations due to the impact of treaties signed with the government and the influence of the Catholic Church (see Washburn 124). In fact, the protagonist-narrator feels pulled in various directions at different stages in the story, since each of these codes seems to offer a different answer to his quest for a solution to his mother's desperate condition: "I had to do what I had to do. This act was before me. In the uncanny light a sense of dread so overwhelmed me that tears started in my eyes and a single choking sound, a sob maybe, a wrench of hurt, burst from my chest" (309). Not only does Joe have to face different paths of action to try to retrieve his family's stability, but he also realizes that he may communicate those intentions following different organizing principles—or genres—that will facilitate his work in this context. His interactions with other characters and with the reader are mediated by these conventional rules of discourse that will allow the use and elaboration of the existing genres (coming-of-age, autoethnography, thriller, etc.), while adapting them to his circumstances. In this regard, Yates and

Orlicowski have described how speakers and writers may decide to maintain or modify the “existing structures of genre” (306) in order to pursue their particular intentions.

## **2. HYBRIDIZING TWO POPULAR GENRES... OR SOMETHING BEYOND?**

The aforementioned blending of genres does not become apparent in the initial stages of the novel, for, at first, it reads more like a detective story in which the main characters are trying to unravel what really happened that fateful Sunday afternoon on which Geraldine Coutts went unexpectedly missing. Joe insists on how the routines of their life were dramatically changed from that moment on and how his mother’s reclusion would affect their family life thereafter:

[...] Mom would have returned by now to start dinner. We both knew that. Women don’t realize how much store men set on the regularity of their habits. We absorb their comings and goings into our bodies, their rhythms into our bones. Our pulses are set to theirs, and as always on a weekend afternoon we were waiting for my mother to start us ticking away on the evening. (6)

Although it is clear from the first chapter that Joe’s mother was violently raped and then drenched in gasoline, due to the victim’s impenetrable silence, the details of the crime are puzzled out only very slowly and painfully throughout the story. Joe’s father, Judge Antone Coutts—who had been one of the narrators in *The Plague of Doves*—, tries to use his experience and connections to shed light on the attack on his wife. However, in spite of overlooking some of his most sacred rules—never to bring home work from his office at the tribal court or not to get emotionally involved in the cases—, it soon transpires that all his efforts to arrest and convict potential perpetrators run into a wall of legal loopholes that prevent him from properly prosecuting the culprit. As some reviewers have explained, seeking justice on the reservation often becomes as calamitous as the crimes themselves (Greenya “Review”; Russo “Disturbing”). On the one hand, there is the question of where exactly the sexual assault took place, which, given the tangle of jurisdictional legislation, becomes critical information:

Here's the round house. Just behind it, you have the Smoker allotment which is now so fractionated nobody can get much use out of it. Then a strip that was sold—fee land. The round house is on the far edge of tribal trust, where our court has jurisdiction, though of course not over a white man. So federal law applies. Down to the lake, that is also tribal trust. But just to one side, a corner of that is state park, where state law applies. On the other side of that pasture, more woods, we have an extension of round house land. (231)

Because Geraldine's head had been covered by a sack while the attack took place, she is unable to indicate precisely where it happened. But, besides, the most likely suspect that comes up, as father and son examine the cases the former had culled from his files, is a non-Native, Linden Lark, over whom the tribal system would have no jurisdiction (see Owens "Historic" 513). As Joe gradually realizes that his father can do little to protect his mom from who or what he refers to as "the carcass" ("All you catch are drunks and hot dog thieves" (265), he tells his father), he decides to get increasingly involved in the resolution and possible reparation of the crime. Here, again, this is observable in the protagonist's behavior, but also in his utterances concerning the situation which, as Bitzer notes, naturally become part of that situation and are often "necessary to the completion of situational activity" (5). By riding his bike with his three friends to the scene of the crime, eavesdropping on police conversations and reflecting on them, and quizzing people such as Linda Lark/Wishkob—Lark's twin sister who was born in the reservation and adopted by an Indian family—, Joe manages to get so close to the truth of the crime that even his mother begins to worry that he may be thinking of taking justice into his own hands:

Now you listen to me, Joe. You will not badger me or harass me. You will leave me to think the way I want to think, here. I have to heal any way I can. You will stop asking questions and you will not give me any worry. You will not go after him. You will not terrify me, Joe. I've had enough fear for my whole life. You will not add to my fear. You will not add to my sorrows. You will not be part of this. (104-105)

But, despite his parents' admonitions, it soon becomes apparent that several factors make it impossible for Joe to refrain from pursuing his own investigations, often assisted by his friends

Cappy, Zack, and Angus. To begin with, there is the daily trial of seeing his mother grief-stricken and adrift in a silent world of her own, where she is beyond the reach of her family and friends: "She slept and slept, like she was sleeping for a sleeping marathon. She ate little. Wept often, a grinding and monotonous weeping that she tried to muffle with pillows but which vibrated through the bedroom door" (54). When it dawns upon Joe that his father's talents in law enforcement are not going to be enough to bring about justice, he decides that it is time to act and to try to lift the cartloads of sadness that are asphyxiating his family. This need to take hold of the reins of their lives at a rather premature age grows particularly urgent when he realizes that his mother has been deeply transformed by the trauma and that he will never recover his "before-mom," if he does not do something drastic about it. Bakhtin's ideas on speech genres may be useful at this point, since it is clear that Joe's voice resonates with the discourse of previous young storytellers also pressed by troubling circumstances and, in a way, also responds to "actual reality and to the real utterances of others" (62)—in this case, coming-of-age narrators. His voice is very much marked by the trauma that derives from observing his mother's miserable condition and the responsibility he feels for being unable to change the state of affairs:

Her voice was neutral, formal, neither caustic nor falsely enthusiastic. I'd thought she was the same mother only with a hollow face, jutting elbows, spiky legs. But I was beginning to notice that she was someone different from the before-mother. The one I thought of as my real mother. I had believed that my real mother would emerge at some point. I would get my before-mom back. But now it entered my head that this might not happen. The damned carcass had stolen from her. Some warm part of her was gone and might not return. (227)

At this stage in the novel, it has already become clear that what had started as a suspense story has turned gently into a psychological drama in which the reader is faced with what Emma Rodriguez has called the protagonist's "traumatic passage into adulthood," a passage that is marked by losses—in freedom and innocence—and by "key decisions" that will define his future existence, whether he likes it or not ("Louise Erdrich"). In a similar line, Julie Tharp argues that "The injustice of it must surely rankle

with every reader. No young man should be forced to make that kind of decision, to carry that kind of burden with him for the rest of his life” (33), when he will still have serious problems in trying to bring the many strands of the story into place. Still, one additional factor that must have been conducive to the protagonist’s immersion in the perilous game of trying to provide a solution to his mother’s baffling riddle is his seemingly innate ability to detect relevant evidence. His own father congratulates him early in the story when, after visiting the scene of the crime, he begins to make intelligent deductions: “All right, Joe, you’re asking a lot of questions. You are developing an order to things in your mind. You’re thinking this out” (34). Of course, later on we learn that the protagonist-narrator has decided, like his father, to make law enforcement his life vocation and profession; yet, what is most interesting is that his somehow “lawyerly approach” to matters seems to dominate even the most trying moments of the story, in which one would have expected a more poignant treatment of the events:

That was when my father had his first heart attack—it turned out to be a small one. Not even a medium one. Just a small one. But it was a heart attack. In the grocery store aisle in the spilt cream and rolling cans, next to the Prell shampoo, my father’s face went a dull yellow color. He strained for breath. He looked up at me, perplexed. And because he had his hand on his chest, I said, Do you want an ambulance? (286)

Since the book highlights the inability of the law to bring peace and justice to the victims and the protagonist himself is forced to make momentous moral decisions (such as killing “the carcass”) at a tender age due to that inability, one may conclude that the author is intent on writing a “protest work of fiction”; one in which her primary aim would be to expose the vulnerable situation faced by Native-American women on reservations—this would of course include Geraldine Coutts and Mayla Wolfskin, but also Linda Wishkob. In fact, in the afterword to the novel, Erdrich includes some statistics gathered from a recent Amnesty International report: “1 in 3 Native women will be raped in her lifetime (and that figure is certainly higher as Native women often do not report rape); 86 percent of rapes and sexual assaults upon Native women are perpetrated by non-Native men; few are prosecuted” (372). Although this disturbing information is disclosed after the end of the story

proper, it is evident that, in retrospect, it makes us see Geraldine Coutts' experience in a more critical light, as her assault is just the tip of a colossal iceberg. Moreover, the author has no qualms about recognizing that her main sources of information while writing the novel were organizations "working to restore sovereign justice and ensure safety for Native women" (372). In view of these clarifications regarding her motives for writing the book and the denouement of the novel, which shows how the protagonist has been haunted all his life by his experiences that terrible summer—"I knew that they knew everything. The sentence was to endure. Nobody shed tears and there was no anger" (371)—, would it not be logical to think of *The Round House* as a literary work primarily oriented to social change? Would this not mean a significant shift in her style and narrative modes—sometimes considered excessively lyrical and abstract? Erdrich herself wrote an editorial in *The New York Times* soon after the publication of the novel in which, in a more belligerent manner, she pursued socio-political goals similar to those advanced by the novel: "To protect Native women, tribal authorities must be able to apprehend, charge and try rapists—regardless of race" (Erdrich "Rape"). This type of complaint has already been raised repeatedly by Judge Coutts throughout the novel, mostly in connection with the continuing presence of federal- and state-law deputies on their lands, who usually forestall the application of the law and, thus, deprive them of their sovereignty:

The reason for Bjerke's [an agent for the FBI] presence continued on through that rotten year for Indians, 1953, when Congress not only decided to try Termination out on us but passed Public Law 280, which gave certain states criminal and civil jurisdiction over Indian lands within their borders. If there was one law that could be repealed or amended for Indians to this day, that would be Public Law 280. But on our particular reservation Bjerke's presence was a statement of our toothless sovereignty. (166)

In spite of the inclusion of these quibbles, which seem directly linked to the Native desire to change the law and reclaim their rights as a community, the reader suspects that Erdrich's ultimate aim reaches beyond these legitimate socio-political ambitions. Like many other ethnic authors, she would probably feel uncomfortable with the dichotomy art versus protest, since all great literary works incorporate one form or another of revolt against the limitations of

human life. Ralph Ellison rightly noted that what is essential for a work of fiction is not so much whether it succeeds as a soundbox resonating with the concerns of a particular human group but, rather, if in raising those concerns, the desired levels of “craftsmanship and universality are being achieved” (169). As will be seen in the next section of this article, *The Round House* rings so true precisely because Erdrich manages to integrate in creative ways that attempt to deal with an urgent problem in the Indian culture—violence against Native women—and the very personal story of a boy of thirteen whose “story modulates between light and darkness, hope and despair to become a confession of sins, and a *cri de coeur* about the mistreatment of Native tribes throughout American history” (Kidd “Teenage”). In this context, genres are not just rhetorical responses to particular historical circumstances, but they present “a dynamic—a potential fusion of elements that may be energized or actualized as a strategic response to a situation” (Jamieson and Campbell 146). Erdrich’s hybridization of a number of conventional genres—*Bildungsroman*, thriller, trauma narrative, etc.—and her own oral storytelling tradition “ensnares” the reader in a story that is several things all at once: “a spellbinding read, an earnest message and fierce emotional punch” (Marszal “Round”).

### **3. THE TRICKY ART OF REPRESENTING LIFE ON INDIAN RESERVATIONS**

So far, I have argued that the somber tone that pervades much of the novel stems from the Coutts’s incapacity to bring their family life back to normalcy after the sexual attack, and from the protagonist-narrator’s gradual realization that he and his father can do little to repair the damage done. Joe’s mother begins to respond to their questions only halfway through the novel, after Joe himself has reminded her of the file she went to seek in her office on the fatal Sunday and the Indian woman—Mayla Wolfskin—she was supposed to meet after getting the documents:

My mother raised herself in bed. Clutching the sheet around her, groping forward in her flowered cotton gown, she gave a weird howl that clapped down my spine. Then she actually got out of bed. She swayed and gripped my arm when I stood to help her. She began to retch. Her puke was startling, bright green. She cried out again and crept back into bed and lay motionless. (185)

This horrifying scene is followed by a period in which Mrs. Coutts starts to send out small signs of recovery and restoration, but the fact that the suspected attacker is allowed to walk freely around the reservation and that she catches her teenage son getting increasingly involved in the case does not help much. Moreover, additional problems start to crowd up in Joe's mind, complicating his endeavors to help his mother. On the one hand, there are the contradictory messages regarding how to deal with evil that he receives from his grandfather, Mooshum, and a Catholic priest, Father Francis Wozniak, which bring him to a crossroads where he needs to choose between (Native) revenge and (Christian) forgiveness. The reader sees Joe shifting between alternative discursive patterns and conventions as he is influenced by these different figures. Native lore, religious rhetoric, legal erudition, etc. boggle his mind to such an extent that it is hard for him to decide which one(s) of them is/are really pertinent. As Bakhtin would put it, "These genres are so diverse because they differ depending on the situation, social position, and personal interrelations of the participants in the communication" (79). On the other hand, there is his warm, but also dangerous, relationship with his uncle's girlfriend, a former stripper, with whom he shares an unspeakable secret related to his mother's attack and Mayla's disappearance, and to whom he threatens to reveal that secret at the most tactless moment—when she is strip-dancing in front of his grandfather: "[...] I thought of you like my son. But you just turned into another piece of shit guy. Another gimme-gimme asshole, Joe. That's all you are" (260). As has been remarked earlier on, all this pressure proves too exacting for Joe's still malleable personality and it is only natural that there should be moments in which he is uncertain as to whether the "wiindigoo"—or evil spirit, according to Ojibwe tradition—is not also "stealing from [him]" (227), as he had done from his adored mother. No wonder, then, that the lens through which we see, especially, the second half of the story should be a rather gloomy and cumbersome one that barely allows us to see a light at the end of the tunnel.

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to assume that the novel offers just a heavily dramatic portrayal of the Coutts' tribulations. After all, the narrator is a 13-year-old boy who, like all children, needs his moments of carefree amusement and relaxation. As Kidd has pointed out, "Erdrich understands that even life's grimmest periods are accompanied by joy, humor, and abandon, especially for

a teenage boy” (“Teenage”). Some of the most memorable passages in the novel follow Joe and his three friends sleuthing, which, for example, takes them to spy on the aforementioned Catholic priest—a former marine and severely-wounded veteran of the Middle East—who is a source of much magnetism among the three youngsters, even after they are caught peeping through his window:

Not only did he own a copy of *Alien*, not only did he have an amazing and terrible wound, but he had called us humiliating names without actually resorting to the usual swear words. Besides that there was the deft speed with which he'd caught Angus, the free weights beside the television, the fancy Michelob. It was almost enough to make a boy want to be a Catholic. (125)

As several scholars have noted, one of Erdrich's major feats in the book is to hit a balance between the grimly-dramatic sections in which Joe and his family are almost totally destroyed by the aftermath of the crime and those others, such as the above, in which important doses of excitement and fun come to color the kids' innocent adventures. On the reservation, Joe and his three friends ride their bikes to visit kind aunts who can be trusted to provide food when they are hungry or grandmas with whom “the church doesn't take” (77) and who tell them in great detail about the physical quirks of their former lovers. Naturally, anything related to sexuality is bound to catch the teenagers' attention, such as a pretty woman's décolletage or the inopportune hard-ons they get in the most unexpected moments (cf. Mace 161-62). And being summertime, there is the spirited celebration of the annual powwow, during which, with a bit of luck, they will meet some girls to fall in love with:

The conversation put us on an easy footing and we walked, circling the arena behind the stands, the girls being noticed, us noticing them being noticed. We went around a few times. The girls bought cotton candy. They peeled off strips of fluff for us. We drank pop and tried to crush the can in our fists. Things started up. [...] We stood on the top tier to watch it all: the drums, the rousing synchrony of bells, rattles, deer clackers, and the flashing music of the jingle dancers. Grand Entry always caught my breath and made me step along with the dancers. It was big, contagious, defiant, joyous. (323-24)

Alan Cheuse, writing a review of *RH* for NPR, has praised “the clarity of mind and emotional distance” that the long view that Joe offers of this turbulent period of his adolescence gives to the most troubling episodes in the story: “All of this he describes in a voice that is smooth but never bland, nurtured by years of experience and honed by memory, a voice reminiscent of some of John Steinbeck’s best narrators” (Cheuse “Round”). Like Steinbeck and other socially-aware writers, Erdrich can be said to represent both the sinister and hopeful, sad and comic details of life on an Ojibwe present-day reservation “in the plain-spoken language of the everyday” (Kellogg “Louise Erdrich’s”) and showcasing the various discourses present in this setting. The reader is privy, of course, to the poverty, violence, and injustices that still prevail in Native lands, but there are also signs that the younger generations and Joe’s moving—but also convincing—story itself have the potential to change the state of affairs in their culture. When in March 2013, Congress passed and President Obama signed the “Violence Against Women Act,” the law sought to remedy some of the injustices that Erdrich had addressed in her novel the previous year. Washburn points out that it would not be unreasonable to think that Erdrich’s book “played some role” (101) in righting what the President had described as “an assault on our national conscience.” In this regard, Carolyn Miller has noted that certain rhetorical compositions—and literary genres—do definitely “help constitute the substance of our cultural life” (163) by bringing new meanings—and urgency—to specific social situations. In view of the awards and popularity that her novel has earned, Erdrich’s use of particular genres and narrative modes seems to succeed in achieving both goals among very diverse readers.

#### **4. CLOSING REMARKS: ON GENRE IN NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE**

From what has been said above, it may be deduced that Erdrich’s *RH* manages at once to raise her peoples’—especially, Native American women’s—voice against the discriminatory treatment they are receiving from state and federal authorities, and to present the devastating impact that crimes of sexual violence still have today on many Indian tribes. The novel shows in highly artistic ways how the life of a happy and cohesive Native family may easily turn into a nightmare when they realize that all sorts of legal loopholes and bad practices constrain their chances of achieving

justice and bringing normalcy back to their household. Numerous Native writers such as D'Arcy McNickle, Leslie M. Silko or Black Elk have shown in their writings that their cultures were historically reduced "by the gnawing flood of the Wasichu" (WASPs) and that they were confined in "little islands" that grew smaller with the passing of the years (Black Elk 9). It is no wonder, then, that these writers should respond to this rhetorical situation by using a discourse that they believe "is capable of positive modification" (Bitzer 7). *RH* by Erdrich demonstrates that issues of jurisdiction and sovereignty should still occupy a prominent place on the Native American socio-political agenda. In this regard, it is no coincidence that Erdrich should decide to have a protagonist-narrator who offers both an innocent rendition of life on the reservation and, as an older prosecutor, a more complex understanding of those issues. Although Joe and his friends may seem too young to be fully aware of the effects of some of the socio-cultural constraints on the reservation, their innocent games reveal an incipient understanding of their disadvantageous historical condition as Indians:

For years our people have struggled to resist an unstoppable array of greedy and unstable beings. Our army has been reduced to a few desperate warriors and we are all but weaponless and starving. We taste the nearness of defeat. But deep in the bowels of our community our scientists have perfected an unprecedented fighting weapon [The Bionic Commando]. Our bionic arm reaches, crushes, flexes, feints, folds. It pierces armor and its heat-seeking sensors can detect the most well-defended foes. (130)

Of course, the epic battle that the boys act out in front of Linda Wishkob at this point of the story is filled up with abundant wishful thinking, since, as they proclaim: "Our destination: enemy headquarters. The heart of our hated foe's impregnable fortress. The challenge: impossible. Our resolve: unflagging. Our courage: quitless" (130-31). And yet, the reader cannot help making connections between the attitudes and determination shown in this juvenile game and the more serious enterprise that Joe and his friends have embarked on in trying to uncloak Geraldine's attacker. As mentioned above, one of the greatest achievements of the novel is precisely the combination of similar doses of the comic and the tragic, and the integration of the Coutts' painful story into the larger

history of the community (see Ferris "Memorializing") by means of genre blending.

Some commentators have complained that this integration is only partially achieved because Erdrich's efforts to show that Joe's family is just as vulnerable to outsiders as any other Native family seems a bit contrived (Kakutani "Ambushed"). Although it is true that Geraldine's and Antone's connection with the villain of the story, Linden Lark, may seem rather unwieldy, it is also evident that it reverberates from the start with racial hatred: "He [Lark] wrote a crank letter to the *Fargo Forum*. Opichi clipped it. I remember it was full of the usual—let's dissolve reservations; he used that old redneck line, 'We beat them fair and square'" (62). Others could also argue that the main popular genres that the author has chosen to employ here are not especially suitable for welding the relational complexities and historical intricacies that are characteristic of Erdrich's fiction—e.g., *Four Souls* or *The Plague of Doves*—and which, as Kellogg states, provided those works with greater "emotional power" ("Louise Erdrich's"). However, as noted earlier on, it would be unjust to conclude that in deciding to write within the more conventional genres of suspense fiction and the coming-of-age trauma story, Erdrich has completely put aside her other sensitivities as a Native writer. In fact, although more accessible to the general reading public—and, thus, more prone to compete for the prestigious prizes that it eventually won—, *The Round House* still contains passages and voices that retrieve the kind of values and wisdom that this author's fiction has invariably conveyed. Both Bitzer and Bakhtin emphasize the importance of hitting a receptive audience that will eventually function as "mediator of the change" that the discourse seeks to bring about (Bitzer 8; Bakhtin 89). Here below is a short passage in which Joe becomes an heir of his ancestors' invaluable knowledge regarding the ceremonial structure of the title—more specifically, the words come from Nanapush and they reach him via his very old grandfather, Mooshum:

Your people were brought together by us buffalo once. You knew how to hunt and use us. Your clans gave you laws. You had many rules by which you operated. Rules that respected us and forced you to work together. Now we are gone, but as you have once sheltered in my body, so now you understand. The round house will be my body, the poles my ribs, the fire my heart. It will be the body of your mother and it must be respected the same way. As the

mother is intent on her baby's life, so your people should think of their children. (251)

Of course, this passage could be read as one of the writer's usual forays into the Chippewa lore and traditions that often enrich Erdrich's works. However, it would be an unpardonable critical blunder not to notice how this cultural fable is intimately linked to the protagonist-narrator's own travail to assuage his traumatized mother and to bring back love and peace to his fractured home. The reader will be missing much of the novel's deftness and originality if s/he fails to recognize all these oblique connections between the narrator's efforts to replevy psychological health and communication in his family and the larger project of retrieving part of the lost sovereignty and self-determination for his community, as well as protecting Native women from all types of sexual aggression. By blending different generic patterns and intertextual conventions, Erdrich can be observed to produce a much needed response to what could be called "a historical exigence" (Jamieson and Campbell 147). As Mace rightly notes, regarding genre and style, Erdrich breaks "new ground in *The Round House* by taking a more political tone and highlighting historic legal difficulties faced by the Chippewa due to laws and policies created by the U.S. government" (160).

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