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Where 'Indians' Fear to Tread? A Postmodern Reading of Louise Erdrich's North Dakota Quartet. By Fabienne C. Quennet.

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Author

Andrews, Scott

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As the years passed, Mr. Ottogary became more active in political affairs, gaining the respect of his community. He went to Washington, D.C., on several occasions from 1917 through the 1920s to make federal officials aware of Shoshone grievances, especially those involving treaty rights and responsibilities, citizenship issues, and more. He continually requested lands for his community, most of which grew through homesteading. He expected reparations based on the 1863 Box Elder Treaty, although his continual reminders fell largely on deaf ears. He joined forces with other Western Shoshone leaders such as Annies Tommey of Deep Creek to protest the draft of Shoshone men for World War I, and was actually arrested as a protester (p. 7). But in all, it was attachment to land and treaty rights that were his consistent passion. He almost realized his dream of land for his community one week before he died, when a letter arrived from Washington suggesting that there would be land (p. 239). The bill that was ultimately signed did not contain this important provision.

Mr. Ottogary also chronicles many activities that show cultural change as well as persistence over his twenty-five-year writing career. He wrote of visiting patterns, Sun Dances and other ceremonies attended, older marriage patterns and child rearing, older subsistence activities such as rabbit hunting (also removal of rabbits from agricultural fields) and pine nut collecting, and much more. He was not given to lengthy descriptions of events, but his mentions of them provide many clues to what was happening on the local level. New forms of athletic competition are mentioned, such as boxing and baseball. He speaks of viewing his first moving picture show, riding on the train, and much more. Changes in land use involved in farming and the seemingly endless cycle of planting and harvesting receive considerable attention. Crops and animals make it through marginal winters, and sometimes not. Mr. Ottogary was above all a farmer who had to feed his family, and who worried considerably about how that would be accomplished given the vagaries of the northern Utah weather.

Willie Ottogary's columns are well worth reading, not only for the actual data they contain, but also as a profile of a Shoshone man adjusting to a new cultural framework while salvaging tradition and dignity. There are data contained therein that contribute details of the broader struggle concerning Western Shoshone land rights which are still at issue. But mostly his story is about life and how it was lived in the early part of the twentieth century in a small, rural, agricultural Indian community.

Catherine S. Fowler

University of Nevada, Reno

Where 'Indians' Fear to Tread? A Postmodern Reading of Louise Erdrich's North Dakota Quartet. By Fabienne C. Quennet. Hamburg, Germany: Lit Verlag, 2001. 241 pages.

German scholar Fabienne Quennet stays true to the subtitle of this in-depth discussion of Louise Erdrich's North Dakota quartet—*Love Medicine* (1984),

The Beet Queen (1986), *Tracks* (1988), and *The Bingo Palace* (1994). Her novels are read from a postmodernist perspective consistently and thoroughly. On the one hand, this analysis could prove refreshing to those students, scholars, and readers looking for something other than the signs of continuity between tribal traditions and contemporary American Indian literature. On the other hand, some readers may feel Quennet emphasizes postmodernism too much, at times appearing to equate similarity with origin or influence.

This is not to say that Quennet does not discuss tribal continuities and Native storytelling traditions in relation to Erdrich's popular novels. However, that train of thought is kept to a minimum, as it has been discussed widely elsewhere and as the book's goal, according to its jacket, is "freeing Native American literature from the limiting label of 'ethnic or minority literature' and of establishing it as a vital part of American literature." Toward this end, Quennet tries to establish Erdrich's credentials as a worthy writer of postmodernist novels, as she ranges skillfully and deeply through much scholarship on postmodern literature. She does not try to erase Erdrich's status as an American Indian writer, however that may be defined, but some readers will take exception to the political consequences of such a project. Why cannot American Indian literature be found worthy of the title "American literature" as American Indian literature? Why must it look like postmodern American literature to be included in the American Literature Club? Why not change the terms of the club's membership rather than make the case that otherwise excluded applicants actually meet the requirements for membership? Additionally, of all the writers of American Indian literature, Erdrich is perhaps the least marginalized. She and Sherman Alexie publish their short stories in the *New Yorker* magazine. Her novels are best sellers and she was recently nominated for the American Book Award (for a novel that updates the North Dakota quartet to a quintet). So the project to "save" a writer from the ethnic literature ghetto would do more service for a writer other than Erdrich, as she does not really need saving—this, of course, assuming that other writers wish to be "saved" from this "limiting" label.

Ranging over the four novels, Quennet's argument states that many elements of Erdrich's novels are as much postmodern as they are American Indian: "her work is an eclectic melange of influences in which the one tradition is not more valid than the other but in which these traditions interact and synthesize into something new" (p. 28). For instance, multiple narrators and conflicting depictions of events may reflect the fiction's allegiances to Native oral traditions, but these qualities also problematize notions of a reality that is knowable beyond the discourse that conveys it. Erdrich's multiple and conflicting narrators work toward the postmodern goal of "subverting traditional concepts of subjectivity and narrative perspectives" (p. 71). Quennet also argues that Erdrich's characters problematize notions of identity formation, especially concerning gender. The constructions of identity in Erdrich's fiction often have been cited by critics as reflecting Native notions of identity that differ from the West's, but Quennet argues that this deconstruction of identity formation is part of the postmodern agenda to problematize nearly all notions of a stable and essential identity. Quennet argues that the conse-

quences of this endeavor, whether originating from tribal or postmodern notions of selfhood, are the same: freeing American Indians from the burdens of stereotype and of the colonizer's history. That is, since identity is performative rather than essential, the American Indian can remake her identity as she sees fit and she can create a space for herself (or her community) within competing American histories. Other aspects of Erdrich's fiction that are discussed in tribal and postmodern terms are magical realism, carnivalesque humor, trickster figures, games, and chance.

At one point, Quennet cites a Lyotard statement concerning "agonistic language games" of postmodernism (p. 201). Exploring the agonistic qualities of Erdrich's combined American Indian and postmodern literary techniques would have been interesting. For instance, is there a contradiction between challenging essentialized notions of identity and having Lipsha inherit his "touch" from his father, Gerry Nanapush, who is a descendant of Fleur? This "touch" identifies them in many ways as particularly or especially Indian, but it is genetically inherited (essential) and not merely performed. They did not choose to become trickster figures or the wielders of powerful medicine, but postmodernism would suggest we are free to choose our identities. Is postmodernism compatible with notions such as the Lakota concept of *tiospaye* (national identity requiring blood relation)? Can one be altered to accommodate the other?

Despite the thoroughness of Quennet's investigation into the qualities of postmodernism that can be found in Erdrich's writings, some aspects of the argument do not stand as solidly as others. For instance, she argues that the truth behind Nanapush's and Pauline's conflicting stories in *Tracks* cannot be known because they are equally unreliable narrators. However, in her own discussions, Quennet labels Pauline as unstable and insane; this seems to make her more unreliable than Nanapush, who is merely a liar at times. And those who label Nanapush a liar are people whom Nanapush himself quotes as calling him that. If Nanapush is untrustworthy, then why should we rely on him to quote his attackers accurately? Perhaps Nanapush says they call him a liar to make him seem more abused at the hands of ungrateful, disrespectful young people. Perhaps they call him a liar not because he lies but because he tells a truth they do not want to believe. The notion that Nanapush and Pauline are equally unreliable is not fully supported, and the notion that they are equally unreliable challenges those who read Nanapush as the tribal heart of the novel and its hero—in the sense that he embodies the Anishinaabeg survival of and resistance against colonialism. Of course, that challenge may be precisely the reason to read Quennet's book.

Quennet goes to great lengths to explain *The Beet Queen* as a self-reflexive text, citing the various things being read by the characters, the ways in which they try to apply what they read to their lives (discovering a large gap between texts and life), and the ways in which the efforts of the characters to understand their worlds mirror the efforts of *The Beet Queen*'s readers to negotiate the novel itself. We cannot say, though, that *The Beet Queen* is self-reflexive in the way that more readily recognized postmodern texts are. There are no self-conscious "winks" to the reader like those provided by John Barth, Kurt

Vonnegut, Donald Barthelme, and others. Even other American Indian writers are more clearly self-reflexive, such as Thomas King in *Green Grass, Running Water* (1994). *The Beet Queen* never reveals itself as a novel any more than any other novel does, through chapter breaks, page numbers, and the like. Granted, the characters try to make sense of their lives based upon the things they read, but people do this in “real life,” so in that sense the novel is realistic. Novels have contained reading characters since novels were first written. Does that make all of them postmodern?

Quennet’s reading of Erdrich probably will present few problems for those readers who already see Erdrich as a cosmopolitan artist rather than a nationalist one, to use Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s designation of types of American Indian literature, in *Why I Can’t Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays* (1996). Quennet writes, “It is in particular Erdrich’s postmodern position that helps her turn away from dominant stereotypes and to embrace the multicultural and multiethnic dimension of contemporary life” (p. 38). According to Quennet, Erdrich already has joined the ranks of the cosmopolitan artists. (Writing from Europe, Quennet is perhaps not as close to the charged nature of debates concerning American multiculturalism.) So, if you are a reader who sees a difference between tolerance and multiculturalism, who prefers the nationalist side of this discussion, and who sees Erdrich as participating in that nationalist project, then you will take issue with many of Quennet’s conclusions. But, as stated before, those challenges may be the best reason to read this book.

Scott Andrews

California State University, Northridge