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The Facts of Fictional Magic: John Tanner as a Source for Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* and *The Birchbark House*

PETER G. BEIDLER

> *The thing is, the events people pick out as magical don't seem unreal to me. Unusual, yes, but I was raised believing in miracles and hearing of true events that may seem unbelievable.*
>
> —Louise Erdrich[1]

One of the curious problems facing contemporary Native American fiction writers is how they learn about their people's history, and one of the curious solutions to this problem is that these writers turn to non-Indian authors to fill gaps in their knowledge about the history and traditions of early Indian peoples. It is ironic that the colonialist attitudes that ultimately led to the near obliteration of early Native ways of life and living oral traditions provide later Indians with written sources of information to which they would otherwise have no access. Thus we find N. Scott Momaday reading Elsie Clews Parsons' ethnographic report *The Pueblo of Jemez* and using it in his novel *House Made of Dawn*. We find Leslie Marmon Silko reading the ethnographic reports of the mythical history of the Pueblo people and using them in her story "Yellow Woman" and her novel *Ceremony*. We find James Welch immersing himself in the historical records of the Blackfeet, many of them written by white historians, as he builds his novel *Fools Crow*. And we find Louise Erdrich reading the pages of an autobiographical narrative by John Tanner, a white captive of the Ottawa and Ojibwa at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, as she develops some of the scenes in her novel *Tracks*, published in 1988 and set between 1912 and 1924, and, more recently, in her juvenile novel *The Birchbark House*, published in 1999 and set between 1847

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and 1848. My purpose in this article is to demonstrate the extent to which Tanner's narrative provided source materials for these two novels. Erdrich, of course, had other written sources, as well as oral family stories and her own personal experiences of life in North Dakota, but scholars working on either *Tracks* or *The Birchbark House* may find it useful to make comparisons with certain sections of Tanner's narrative. My secondary purpose is to suggest that Erdrich was more willing than Tanner to accept as fact the magical ways of the Ojibwa.

John Tanner was living in Kentucky not far southwest of what is now Cincinnati when at age nine he was captured by the Ojibwa while collecting nuts near his home. After a couple of years the Shawnee sold him to Net-no-kwa, a remarkable Ottawa woman, who, with her Ojibwa husband, adopted him as a replacement for a biological son she had lost. Tanner then spent nearly thirty years living as an Ottawa-Ojibwa (hereafter referred to as Ojibwa) hunter and trapper, supporting his adoptive mother and her family, and then his own Ojibwa wives and children. During that period he was an Ojibwa in all but his genes. Although at first he thought of trying to escape, he soon settled agreeably enough into his life as an Indian. Eventually he did go back to search out the remnants of his white family, but he felt awkward and uncomfortable among these men and women who had become strangers and whose language he no longer spoke fluently or understood easily. He eventually went back to his "own" people, the northern Ojibwa, and finally settled among the whites of that region. A doctor named Edwin James became interested in Tanner, encouraged him to tell his story, then wrote it down. The story of Tanner's "captivity and adventures" during his thirty years with the Ojibwa, along with some supporting information on the lifeways and languages of the "Indians in the Interior of North America," was published in 1830, when Tanner was around fifty years old. Tanner lived for at least another decade-and-a-half. He supported himself during his later years as an interpreter in the Lake Superior region, including a stint as an interpreter for Henry R. Schoolcraft. Toward the end of his life, angry, depressed, estranged from his various families, and accused of a murder he probably did not commit, John Tanner disappeared in 1846 and probably died in 1847. It may well be that he died in the woods where he made his home for so many decades, but his body was never positively found. It is even possible that he died of smallpox in the 1847 epidemic—the central event of Erdrich's *The Birchbark House.*

We know that Erdrich knew John Tanner's life story, first published in 1830 as *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner.*[2] The book was reissued with a new introduction by Noel M. Loomis when Erdrich was just two years old.[3] It was reissued again, in a truncated format but with a most interesting introduction by Erdrich herself, in a 1994 Penguin edition entitled *The Falcon.* In her introduction Erdrich speaks warmly of Tanner's fascinating story of his captivity by and life among the Ojibwa. She states that a well-worn copy of Tanner's first-person account held a prominent place on the bookshelves of Patrick Gourneau, her grandfather, on the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation in North Dakota: "I first read it on the sun-soaked back steps of his house, just beyond the shade of the spreading woods where

Tanner once joined an ill-fated early nineteenth-century Cree war party."[4] Tanner's book, she writes, was a "family touchstone" and stood alongside other important books in her grandfather's house.[5] Because we know that Erdrich knew and admired this book from a young age, and because it is one of the most reliable published accounts of early Ojibwa life, scholars interested in the factual antecedents of Erdrich's fiction will find it helpful to see instances where Tanner's story influenced two of her narratives.

TRACKS:
BOILED HANDS, TOBACCO, AND COURTING WITH MEAT

Readers of both books will perhaps notice several general parallels between Tanner's *Narrative* and Erdrich's *Tracks.* The children that Tanner's Ojibwa mother Net-no-kwa adopted from time to time to replace her own dead children, with Tanner and Skawah-shish being the central examples, may prefigure in *Tracks* the children Nanapush "adopts"—first Fleur and then Lulu—after his own family is killed off in the epidemic of 1912. Net-no-kwa's strength as a medicine woman, wife, and mother may have been translated into the strength of female characters like Fleur and Margaret in *Tracks.* Tanner's association with the raptor falcon may also have influenced Erdrich to associate Pauline with the scavenger vulture.

Tanner speaks of an Ojibwa ceremony called the Waw-be-no that involved the plunging of hands into boiling liquid:

> Sometimes one of the principal performers at a Waw-be-no, has a kettle brought and set down before him, which is taken boiling from the fire, and before it has time to cool, he plunges his hands to the bottom, and brings up the head of the dog, or whatever other animal it may be which had been purposely put there.... They are able to withstand the effects of fire and of heated substances by . . . a certain preparation, effected by the application of herbs, which make the parts to which they are applied insensible to fire. The plants they use are the Wa-be-no-wusk, and Pe-zhe-ke-wusk. The former grows in abundance on the island of Mackinac, and is called yarrow by the people of the United States. The other grows only in the prairies. These they mix and bruise, or chew together, and rub over their hands and arms.... [T]he two when mixed together seem to give the skin, even of the lips and tongue, an astonishing power of resisting the effects of fire.[6]

There can be no doubt that this Waw-be-no ceremony suggested to Erdrich the idea for Nanapush's claim that he uses two plants to protect his hands from the heat as he plunges his hands into the cook pot:

> There are two plants. One is yarrow and the other I will not name. These are the sources of my medicine.... I mixed and crushed the ingredients. The paste must be rubbed on the hands in a certain way, then up to the elbows, with exact words said. When I first dreamed the method of doing this, I got rude laughter. I got jokes about little boys playing with fire. But the person who visited my dream told me what

> plants to spread so that I could plunge my arms into a boiling stew kettle, pull meat from the bottom, or reach into the body itself and remove, as I did so long ago with Moses, the name that burned, the sickness.[7]

It is important to note, however, that Erdrich has Nanapush claim that the medicines came to him not from an Ojibwa ceremonial practice but directly from a magical dream, and that he used the special medicines to help extract from Moses a name that would kill him and then give Moses "a new name to fool death" (*T* 35). It is also important to note that whereas Tanner (or his as-told-to writer Edwin James) questions the validity of the Waw-be-no as a remnant of "a false and dangerous religion" and suggests that the performers of it "are able to withstand the effects of fire and of heated substances by what they would persuade the ignorant to be a supernatural power" (*N* 122), Erdrich takes the two plants, one yarrow and the other that Nanapush "will not name," seriously as a spiritual and medicinal preparation. Nanapush, unlike Tanner, tells us that certain "exact words" must be said, thus increasing the spiritual or magical properties of the plants. And it is those same special plants that Pauline knows nothing of when she plunges her own hands into boiling water "to prove Christ's ways":

> She prayed loudly in Catholic Latin, then plunged her hands, unprepared by the crushed roots and marrows of plants, into the boiling water. She lowered them farther, and kept them there. (*T* 190)

Pauline burns her hands so terribly that she has to be bandaged and then fed by the nuns during a long period of recuperation.

Erdrich also based Margaret's use of tobacco to calm the waters on a similar incident in Tanner's *Narrative.* Tanner speaks of an Ojibwa chief's offering of tobacco to appease the Great Spirit as he and his people cross a lake. He does so to ensure a gentle passage in the canoes. "[T]he chief, in a very loud voice, addressed a prayer to the Great Spirit, entreating him to give us a good look to cross the lake," Tanner says, and the chief "then threw into the lake a small quantity of tobacco, in which each of the canoes followed his example" (*N* 25). Growing out of this incident is the scene in *Tracks* where Margaret and Nanapush cross the lake in their leaky boat. Margaret "pinched tobacco from a pouch in her pocket, threw it on the water and said a few distracted, imploring words" (*T* 51). When the waves get rough halfway across the lake, she "reached into her pocket again and this time dumped the whole pouch into the pounding waves" (*T* 51). She also dips furiously with the lard can: "I never saw the lard can move so fast, before or since. The old woman made it flash and dip" (*T* 51). Margaret's bailing action is reminiscent of Tanner's action in crossing a lake: "Here we were much endangered by high winds, the waves dashing into our canoe so fast that I was scarcely able, with a large kettle, to throw out the water as fast as it came in" (*N* 27). These scenes involving the spirit-satisfying use of tobacco may also reflect another Ojibwa's offering of tobacco: "One night, Pich-e-to

becoming much alarmed at the violence of the storm, got up and offered some tobacco to the thunder, intreating [*sic*] it to stop" (*N* 123).

A less likely example of the influence of Tanner on Erdrich's *Tracks* may to be found in Tanner's courtship practices with a particular woman. The courtship seems stalled until Tanner heeds the advice of his Ojibwa mother Net-no-kwa and gets up early in the morning to brings back a heavy load of moose meat:

> "Up," said the old woman, who stood by me with a stick in her hand, "up, young man, you who are about to take yourself a wife, up, and start after game. It will raise you more in the estimation of the woman you would marry to see you bring home a load of meat early in the morning than to see you dressed ever so gaily, standing about the village after the hunters are all gone out." (*N* 102)

Eli's effort to get back into Fleur's good graces after the incident with Sophie involves his taking the advice of Nanapush, the older and wiser parent-figure he is living with. Nanapush sends Eli out on a successful trek to kill a moose, and then makes sure that Eli takes most of the meat to Fleur:

> That day he snowshoed out two times, the next day two more, and brought back the rest of the cached meat. A small part he brought back to me and the rest he left at Fleur's door. As I advised, he made sure she saw him fall to the ground, as burdened with sorrow. (*T* 109)

Both frustrated young suitors and moose hunters do succeed in getting the favorable attention of the women they love. The two moose hunts themselves call for a closer comparison.

MEDICINE HUNTS AND PUNISHING WINDS

When just a boy, Tanner experiences his first "medicine hunt." It comes in the winter when there is snow is on the ground. The people are starving. Old Net-no-kwa, Tanner's Ojibwa mother, has a hunting dream that Tanner hears about:

> I was wakened again by the loud praying and singing of the old woman, who continued her devotions through great part of the night. Very early on the following morning she called us all to get up, and put on our moccasins and be ready to move. She then called Wa-me-gon-a-biew to her, and said to him, in a rather low voice, "My son, last night I sung and prayed to the Great Spirit, and when I slept, there came to me one like a man, and said to me, 'Net-no-kwa, to-morrow you shall eat a bear. There is, at a distance from the path you are to travel to-morrow, and in such a direction, (which she described to him,) a small round meadow, with something like a path leading from it; in that path there is a bear.' Now, my son, I wish you to go to that place . . . and you will certainly find the bear." (*N* 32)

Wa-me-gon-a-biew, several years older than his adoptive brother Tanner, does not believe his mother's dream and refuses to follow her directions, but young Tanner, having overheard the account, gets his gun and follows her directions:

> At length, I found what appeared at some former time to have been a pond. It was a small, round, open place in the woods, now grown up with grass and some small bushes. This I thought must be the meadow my mother had spoken of; and examining it around, I came to an open place in the bushes, where it is probable, a small brook ran from the meadow.... I walked a few paces into the open place, resembling a path, when I unexpectedly fell up to my middle into the snow. I extricated myself without difficulty, and walked on; but remembering that I had heard the Indians speak of killing bears in their holes, it occurred to me that it might be a bear's hole into which I had fallen, and looking down into it, I saw the head of a bear lying close to the bottom of the hole. I placed the muzzle of my gun nearly between his eyes, and discharged it. (*N* 33)

Young Tanner is not strong enough to lift the dead bear from its hibernation hole, but he summons help from the others. Net-no-kwa, delighted with her adoptive son, holds a feast in his honor.

This medicine hunt in Tanner's *Narrative* could well have influenced one of the most memorable scenes in *Tracks.* Nanapush, hungry enough to think that "I might be forced to boil my moccasins,"[8] but with a pain in his hip that "made me feel so poor I could not hunt," sends the inexperienced Eli Kashpaw, then aged nineteen, out hunting (*T* 98). Nanapush helps him by going into a kind of singing trance and, from his cabin, has a vision in which he watches and guides Eli: "I began to sing slowly, calling on my helpers, until the words came from my mouth but were not mine, until the rattle started, the song sang itself, and there, in the deep bright drifts, I saw the tracks of Eli's snowshoes clearly" (*T* 101). Eli, meanwhile, wanders, confused and weak from hunger:

> He did not know what he hunted, what sign to look for or to follow. He let the snow dazzle him and almost dropped his gun. And then the song picked up and stopped him until he understood, from the deep snow and light hard crust, the high wind and rolling clouds, that everything around him was perfect for killing moose. (*T* 101)

Eli finds moose tracks and follows them into a depression in the land, probably a dried slough or pond, and, guided by Nanapush's song, fires at the moose. Nanapush tells us that the brush might have deflected the bullet, "[b]ut my song directed it to fly true" (*T* 103). Eli kills the moose and, with continued vision-direction from Nanapush back in his cabin, dresses it out, caches some of the meat, and carries the rest home, guided by the unheard rhythm of Nanapush's drum.[9]

Erdrich might have gotten from Tanner's *Narrative* the basic idea for the story of an old man in a vision giving directions to a neophyte hunter in a time

of desperate starvation. There are some obvious differences in the two accounts. In Tanner's *Narrative* the person who gives the directions is the hunter's adoptive Indian mother, not an adoptive father. The directions are given in advance of the hunt, not during the hunt. The hunted animal is a bear, not a moose, and is hibernating, not foraging. Still, the basic situation is similar enough to suggest the likelihood of influence.

Of particular interest is that Erdrich takes the magical elements of the medicine hunt more seriously than Tanner does. An enigmatic statement by Tanner, a few pages later, refers to a similar incident in which old Net-no-kwa was known to falsify the ability to have dream visions: "although she pretended that the bear had been given her by the Great Spirit, and the place where he lay pointed out to her in a dream, the truth was, she had tracked him into the little thicket, and then circled it, to see that he had not gone out. Artifices of this kind, to make her people believe she had intercourse with the Great Spirit, were, I think, repeatedly assayed by her" (*N* 48). The statement seems to contradict other parts of Tanner's *Narrative*, and Tanner's own subsequent success with the medicine hunt. It is not clear what motive Net-no-kwa would have for lying about the dream. If she had tracked the bear, why would she not simply have said so? I suspect that Edwin James, the as-told-to writer of Tanner's narrative, added his own private opinion to the explanation actually offered by Tanner, but passed it off as the speaker's.[10]

Also worth mentioning in connection with Nanapush's hunting vision is John Tanner's own successful hunting vision. Again, as with his Indian mother, Tanner's vision comes in a time of desperate hunger for his family:

> [W]e were all reduced nearly to starvation, and had recourse, as a last resort, to medicine hunting. Half the night I sung and prayed, and then lay down to sleep. I saw in my dream a beautiful young man come down through the hole in the top of my lodge, and he stood directly before me. "What," he said, "is this noise and crying that I hear? Do I not know when you are hungry and in distress? I look down upon you at all times, and it is not necessary you should call me with such loud cries." Then pointing directly towards the sun's setting, he said, "do you see those tracks?" "Yes," I answered, "they are the tracks of two moose." "I give you those two moose to eat...." I very soon awoke and . . . [a]t the earliest dawn, I started from the lodge in a heavy fall of snow, and taking the course pointed out to me, long before noon I fell on the track of two moose, and killed them both, a male and a female, and extremely fat. (*N* 180–84)

Tanner's dream-vision in which a man speaks to him to give him supernatural directions reminds us of Nanapush's dream-vision when he learns of the special heat-resistant qualities of certain plants: "I dreamed the method of doing this.... The person who visited my dream told me..." (*T* 188). In any case, Erdrich is more inclined to accept the role of the "supernatural" than is her source.

Tanner's recounting of this incident of the two moose introduces a brief exposition on the role of Na-na-bush in medicine hunts:

> The songs used on occasion of these medicine hunts have relation to the religious opinions of the Indians. They are often addressed to Na-na-boo-shoo, or Na-na-bush, whom they entreat to be their interpreter, and communicate their request to the Supreme.... Na-na-bush, ever the benevolent intercessor between the Supreme Being and mankind, procured to be created for their benefit the animals whose flesh should be for their food, and whose skins were for their clothing. He sent down roots and medicines of sovereign power to heal their sicknesses, and in times of hunger, to enable them to kill the animals of the chase. (*N* 184–85)

In light of this explicit statement about the importance of Na-na-bush as a personage who in time of hunger helps human beings kill game, it is possible that Erdrich recalled this statement in having her own character Nanapush be the one who enables the inexperienced Eli to bring home a moose to feed himself and his family.[11]

Let us now consider the ability of Tanner's adoptive mother, Net-no-kwa, to influence the wind. Not long after she has her dream of the location of a bear in a round depression in the earth, Net-no-kwa also dreams of a moose hunt. She and her family are near starvation again, and again old Net-no-kwa spends a night in song and prayer:

> In the morning she said . . . , "Go and hunt, for the Great Spirit has given me some meat." But Wa-me-gon-a-biew objected, as he said the weather was too cold and calm, and no moose could be approached so near as to shoot him. "I can make a wind," answered Net-no-kwa, "and though it is now still and cold, the warm wind shall come before night. Go, my sons, you cannot fail to kill something, for in my dream I saw Wa-me-gon-a-biew coming into the lodge with a beaver and a large load of meat on his back." At length they started, having suspended at their heads and on their shot pouches the little sacks of medicine which the old woman had provided for them with the assurance that, having them, they could not possibly fail of success. They had not been a long time absent, when the wind rose from the south, and soon blew high, the weather, at the same time, becoming warmer. At night, they returned, loaded with the flesh of a fat moose, and Wa-me-gon-a-biew with a beaver on his back, as the old woman had seen him in her dream. (*N* 54)

I am particularly interested in Net-no-kwa's apparent ability to call forth a warm south wind to aid in the hunt. Surely this sequence might have influenced not only Eli's successful hunt for the moose in *Tracks,* but also Fleur's ability to call forth the wind. Fleur exercises this wind-generating power first when she seems to call forth a tornado to punish her three rapists in Argus:

> [T]he wind blew suddenly, cold.... Outside, the wind was stronger, a hand held against us. We struggled forward. The bushes tossed, rain battered, the awning flapped off a storefront, the rails of porches rattled.... [E]verything in Argus fell apart and got turned upside down, smashed, and thoroughly wrecked. (*T* 27–28)

As a result of that tornado wind, Lily and Tor freeze to death in the meat locker, while Dutch is left a limbless stump of a man. Pauline, who narrates this section, is not the most reliable of narrators, but her hint that Fleur sends the wind seems reasonable enough in view of Nanapush's narration about the wind that Fleur seems to send at the very end of *Tracks* to punish the loggers:

> It was then I felt the wind building on the earth. I heard the waves begin to slap with light insistence against the shore. I knew the shifting of breeze, the turn of weather, was at hand.... And now, along the edge of the last high woods, a low breeze moaned out of the stumps.... The wind shrieked and broke, tore into the brush, swept full force upon us. (*T* 222–23)

That carefully directed wind blows down the trees around Fleur's cabin, smashing equipment but sparing the men. That wind is apparently Fleur's final hurrah, her last revenge before she takes her cart and heads away from the land that the white man has taken from her, rapist-like, by force.

Fleur's successful use of her magical power with the wind is balanced by her failure to manage a magical hunting dream. Shortly after she loses her second baby, Fleur's dream comes to her, but it is not successful, despite her optimism:

> "Uncle," she smiled, holding my [Nanapush's] hand, "today we'll eat fresh venison."
>
> She told Eli of the path that had appeared in her sleep, a complicated trail through the woods, where the deer tracks began. He listened to her, even repeated her directions to make certain that he had them memorized. Then, in great excitement, he took his gun, a handful of dried rosehips, and went out. All that day we fasted easily, anticipating his return. But he came back empty-handed. The snow where she sent him was smooth and bare. There was no sign of so much as a rabbit or a squirrel. (*T* 170–71)

While Nanapush is successful in magical endeavors that bring sustenance to his friends, Fleur is successful only in magical endeavors that bring punishment to her enemies. In any case, there is surely a connection between Tanner's narrative and both Nanapush's nourishing visions and Fleur's punishing winds.

LOVE MEDICINE AND POISONING PICTURES

In chapter 10 of his *Narrative* Tanner speaks of a special kind of medicine hunt in which the hunter draws a sketch of the animal to be hunted and then rubs on the sketch a special concoction of substances. He tells us that this method of hunting is similar to the method used by the Ojibwa to punish their enemies:

> Precisely the same method is practiced in this kind of hunting, at least as far as the use of medicine is concerned, as in those instances where one Indian attempts to inflict disease or suffering on another. A drawing, or a little image, is made to represent the man, the woman, or the animal, on which the power of the medicine is to be tried; then the part representing the heart is punctured with a sharp instrument, if the design be to cause death, and a little of the medicine is applied. The drawing or image of an animal used in this case is called muzzi-ne-neen, muzzi-ne-neen-ug, (pl.) and the same name is applicable to the little figures of a man or woman, and is sometimes rudely traced on birch bark. (*N* 164)

In the next chapter Edwin James inserted a long footnote of particular relevance to readers of *Tracks*. In it James describes a sketch or carved bit of wood that shows the image of the animal or person that is the desired object of romance, hunt, or revenge. Of interest in these quotations is the power of love medicines and of the destructive poisoning that the Ojibwa Indians associate with drawn pictures or images. Near the start of the note is this description of love medicine:

> Their use . . . extends to the making of love.... It is a prevailing belief to which the influence of established superstition has given an astonishing power, that the necromancers, men and women of medicine, or those who are acquainted with the hidden powers of their wusks, can, by practicing upon the Muz-zin-ne-neence, exercise an unlimited control over the body and mind of the person represented. As it may have been, in former times, among the people of our race, many a simple Indian girl gives to some crafty old squaw her most valued ornaments, or whatever property she may possess, to purchase from her the love of the man she is most anxious to please. The old woman, in a case of this kind, commonly makes up a little image of stained wood and rags, to which she gives the name of the person whose inclinations she is expected to control; and to the heart, the eyes, or to some other part of this, she, from time to time applies her medicine. (*N* 181n)

Nanapush in *Tracks* refers to the same sort of activity when he tells the lovesick Eli, "Love medicine is what you're after.... [O]ld lady Aintapi or the Pillagers, they sell it. Go ask Moses for a medicine and pay your price" (*T* 45). Eli does not avail himself of the services of such a person, but Nanapush later wonders whether Fleur, eager to find a father for the child conceived in Argus, may not use such medicines on Eli:

> It didn't occur to me till later to wonder if it didn't go both ways, though, if Fleur had wound her private hairs around the buttons of Eli's shirt, if she had stirred smoky powders or crushed snakeroot into his tea. Perhaps she had bitten his nails in sleep, swallowed the ends, snipped threads from his clothing and made a doll to wear between her legs. (*T* 48–49)

Although Eli does not go to Moses for a love medicine, Pauline, eager to enjoy the embraces of Eli through a sort of possession of Sophie's body, does go to him and pay him for the medicine that will give her what she needs:

> I'd traded candles and ribbons for the thing I needed from Moses, who made the dreamcatcher. He gave me the sack of medicine powder, then held my eyes with his and made me tell him whom I meant to snare. He dragged Eli's name from me.... The dust Moses had concocted was crushed fine of certain roots, crane's bill, something else, and slivers of Sophie's fingernails. I would bake it all in Eli's lunch. (*T* 80)

The medicine has the desired effect of bringing Eli and Sophie together for prolonged love-making in the slough, with the love-struck Pauline participating vicariously from the nearby thicket.

Medicine can also be used for more negative purposes. As James puts it in the long note about the Muz-zin-ne-neen-suk:

> These little images, or drawings . . . rudely sketched on birch bark, or even traced in sand, are much in use among several . . . tribes. Their use is not confined to hunting, but extends to the . . . gratification of hatred, revenge, and all malignant passions.... [T]he influence of these images and conjurations, is more frequently tested in cases of an opposite character; where the inciting cause is not love, but hatred, and the object to be attained, the gratification of a deadly revenge.... Sometimes they blacken the hands and mouth of the image, and the effect expected, is the change which marks the near approach of death. (*N* 181–83n)

Erdrich draws on this information from James's note in her description of the possible cause of death for Boy Lazarre, whom Fleur wants to punish for his part in the rape of the locks of her mother-in-law-to-be Margaret. She starts by gathering some bits from Lazarre for the deadly poison she will use against him:

> He did not defend himself but his useless tongue clattered when she approached, reached for him, gently and efficiently cut bits of his hair, held his hands and trimmed their nails. She waved the knife before his eyes and swept a few eyelashes into a square of floursacking that she then carefully folded into her blouse.
>
> For days after, Lazarre babbled and wept. Fleur was murdering him by use of bad medicine. He showed his hand, the bite that Margaret had dealt him, and the dark streak from the wound, along his wrist and inching up his arm. (*T* 120)

Later Boy Lazarre does die in Fleur's presence, and Nanapush, in what seems a direct paraphrase of what Erdrich read in the note in Tanner's story, tells us that Fleur must have drawn an image of Lazarre on a piece of birch bark and stained it with her medicine:

> All the whispers were true. She had scratched Lazarre's figure into a piece of birchbark, drawn his insides, and rubbed a bit of vermillion up his arms until the red reached his heart. There was no sound as he fell, no cry, no word. (*T* 125)

While James was careful to distance himself and his readers from such practices by calling them "superstitions and absurd fears," Erdrich seems to accept such practices as both acceptable and believable (*N* 183n). She never suggests that either Pauline or Fleur is guilty of "superstition" or that Nanapush is giving way to "absurd fears" when he describes the magical and necromantic ways of love medicines, images, and poisons.

THE BIRCHBARK HOUSE: DISEASE, DOGS, AND MEDICINE HUNTS

The likely connection between Tanner's *Narrative* and Erdrich's *Tracks* justifies an examination of Erdrich's other books for further evidence that Erdrich drew on Tanner's book. We find such evidence in Erdrich's 1999 juvenile novel *The Birchbark House.* Like *Tracks,* this book is set in early Ojibwa times, the times Erdrich cannot know from personal experience. The book is, Erdrich writes in the book's acknowledgments, "an attempt to retrace my own family's history," and she specifically thanks "all of the devoted people at the Madeline Island Historical Society."[12] She mentions no specific books that she consulted for her writing of the novel, but it may not be entirely coincidental that *The Birchbark House* focuses on the terrible smallpox epidemic of 1847—the year Tanner himself apparently died. In any case, Erdrich would have been particularly interested in the lifeways of the Ojibwa at about that time. Where better might she look than in Tanner's *Narrative*?

The Birchbark House is the story of Omakayas (pronounced, Erdrich tells us, Oh-MAH-kay-ahs), or Little Frog. While much of the story is a descriptive account of Ojibwa family life at mid century, its narrative centers on a key year in the life of a girl of seven who is forced to face some harsh realities when smallpox strikes her family. The disease disfigures her lovely sister, nearly kills both parents, and does kill her baby brother. After the smallpox passes, Omakayas helps her grandmother take care of her weakened parents and siblings. With her help they survive a terrible winter of hunger. When spring comes, Omakayas learns to deal with the depression that has clouded her winter, and she comes to understand from Old Tallow, a rugged and independent woman, that she is not a blood member of her family, but had been adopted when her own biological family was carried off by disease when she was just a baby, like Fleur in *Tracks.*

The account of the ravages of smallpox in *The Birchbark House* is reminiscent of John Tanner's account of the ravages of the measles:

> When we arrived we found the Indians suffering very severely from the measles; and as Net-no-kwa was acquainted with the contagious nature this disease, she was unwilling to expose her family, but passed immediately through the village and encamped on the river above. But,

> notwithstanding her precaution, we soon began to fall sick. Of ten persons belonging to our family, including two young wives of Taw-ga-we-ninne, only Net-no-kwa and myself escaped an attack of this complaint. Several of them were very sick, and the old woman and myself found it as much as we could do to take care of them. In the village, numbers died, but all of our family escaped. (*N* 18)

Erdrich spends many more pages on the smallpox of 1847. Indeed, it takes up most of a twenty-page chapter—almost one-tenth of the novel. The chapter entitled "The Visitor" begins with the arrival of a sick trapper who joins the family for a meal, but who dies shortly afterward of smallpox. The family members carry the body to the far end of the island, burn everything the visitor was known to have touched, including his blankets, and purify themselves in a sweat lodge. Still, the disease strikes them, one by one. Though they try to quarantine the sick ones, the terrible disease eventually brings all but two down: the grandmother, Nokomis, who had the disease before, and Omayakas, who (she discovers later) was the sole survivor of the disease that killed all others in her family. Again the parallels are inexact, but the coming of a dreaded disease that infects a whole family except two who were somehow immune through previous contact and who care for the rest of the family could have found an origin in Tanner's *Narrative.*

Old Net-no-kwa is forced to kill a favorite dog in Tanner's *Narrative.* The circumstances are familiar in Tanner's repeated accounts of near starvation. After wounding but failing to bring down a caribou, the hungry family nearly collapses from the exertion of traveling so far:

> Our prospect was now so discouraging that we concluded to lighten ourselves by leaving some baggage, in order to make the greater expedition. We also killed our last dog, who was getting too weak to keep up with us; but the flesh of this animal, for some reason, the old woman would not eat. (*N* 56)

A later passage shows Tanner himself punishing his best dog for its disobedience:

> I hunted day after day without the least success, and we were reduced to extreme hunger, when one day I found a moose, and after I had, with the greatest difficulty, crept near, I was about to shoot him when my best dog, which I had confined at home, came running past me, and scared the moose away. I returned home, and calling my dog to me outside the lodge, I told him that it was his fault that there was no food for my children. I then killed and gave him to my family to eat. (*N* 202)

These passages find rough parallels in *The Birchbark House* when Old Tallow sacrifices a favorite dog in a time of great hunger. Omakayas is out trying to discover a squirrel cache so she can bring in some nuts for her family to eat when she is confronted by Old Tallow's cowardly yellow dog. When the dog bites Omakayas, Old Tallow, having warned the dog before, speaks to it, then kills it:

> Sadly and firmly, holding him by the neck, she told the dog what he had done.
>
> "Didn't I warn you, didn't I say to you, didn't I tell you many times that you must never hurt this one? Yes, n'dai, you look at me now with pleading eyes, but I spared you many times before. Each time I spared your life, I always told you what would happen if you were so foolish again. Now, my foolish friend, you must die."
>
> With that, Old Tallow brought the blunt end of her ax down on the yellow dog's head. He crumpled to the ground.... Old Tallow's justice was harsh. Her sentence was carried out in an instant, but that didn't mean that her heart was hard or that she didn't mourn for her friend. It just meant that Omakayas was more important. The last that Omakayas saw of the yellow dog, he was bundled in old Tallow's arms. The strong old woman was walking away, and in her step there was the sadness of parting with an old . . . friend. (*BH* 180–81)

Again, the parallels are not exact. It is not clear, for example, whether Old Tallow eats her dog, though with great hunger in the land it easy enough to assume that she does, or at least that she offers it for others to eat. In any case, it cannot be entirely coincidental that Erdrich gives us a woman who, after explaining the situation to a favorite dog, sadly sacrifices it.[13]

We have seen that Erdrich may have based her stories of medicine hunts in *Tracks* on Tanner's accounts of magical dreams in his *Narrative*. It is interesting that Erdrich uses a similar incident in *The Birchbark House*. In this scene, involving a great one-horned deer, it is again a time of great famine. Old Nokomis wakes up one morning and calls her son-in-law, Deydey (so called because he is Omakayas's daddy), to her side:

> [S]he was so weak from hunger she could only sit wrapped in her blanket by the fire.
>
> "I dreamed last night," she told him. "And now you must do everything just as I say."
>
> Deydey listened intently.
>
> "Take the small path to the north, that leads past the fish camp," said Grandma, gesturing slowly. She squinted. Looked deeper into her dream. Nodded slowly. "When you come to the tallest of the trees, go toward the lake, then around the rocks and back into the trees. There, the buck will wait for you."
>
> Deydey knew when Grandma dreamed, especially in this extremity, it was a true dream and must be followed. . . . [H]e went immediately out and followed Grandma's directions exactly. Just as she had said, in the clearing past the rocks and back in the trees, One Horn was waiting. The great buck stood still in the calm light. Deydey lifted his gun, breathed his hopes. Then thanks. One shot. The shot went true. One Horn died easily, right then.
>
> Deydey gave tobacco to the deer's spirit and thanked him, brought back as much as he could carry, then buried the rest of the deer in snow. Returning, he gave the venison to his starving family and to Tallow, who shared it out. (*BH* 182–83)

This scene hearkens back to Net-no-kwa's dream in Tanner's *Narrative*, and to Tanner's trip to kill the bear his mother saw in her dream. Once again, Erdrich takes magical properties seriously in her own work, while Tanner, or his skeptical white editor, questioned such powers.

CONCLUSION

A number of the elements in Erdrich's *Tracks* and her *Birchbark House* have their origins in John Tanner's *Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner*. Erdrich would be the first to admit this influence on these two works—the only two set early enough to have shown such influence. She is proud to report, after all, that she had read the Tanner book while visiting her grandparents at Turtle Mountain and that a well-worn copy was passed among family members for years.

The characters and circumstances in her own narratives are different from those in Tanner's *Narrative*, but there is no question that Erdrich adapted certain ideas and incidents from the earlier book. Though some of the parallels I have drawn are perhaps more accurately described as echoes rather than borrowings or influences, there is no question that in her desire to learn about the early history and lifeways of the Ojibwa, Erdrich turned to the autobiographical narrative of a white man who was a captive and later a resident of the Ojibwa.[14] And there can be no doubt that she did not share the skepticism that Edwin James, and at times perhaps Tanner himself, felt toward the magical forces at work among the Ojibwa. Rather, she used her narrative pen to transform what to many readers sounds like the unrealistic magical fiction of Tanner's facts into her own facts of fictional magic.

NOTES

1. Louise Erdrich, "An Interview with Louise Erdrich," in *Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris*, eds. Nancy Feyl Chavkin and Allan Chavkin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 221. In this mail interview Erdrich mentions, "I'm writing an introduction to John Tanner's narrative, an old family favorite, one I'm pleased to finally see reissued" (p. 233). The date on the introduction is June 1993. When asked about who her favorite authors in her apprenticeship years were, she listed thirteen names, among them John Tanner (p. 232).

2. John Tanner, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner (U.S. Interpreter at the Saut de Ste. Marie) during Thirty Years Residence among the Indians in the Interior of North America, Prepared for the Press by Edwin James, M.D.* (New York: G. and C. and H. Carvill, 1830). James wrote a lengthy introductory chapter to this edition. In it he reveals a little about his own role in the narrative: "[Tanner's] whole story was given as it stands, without hints, suggestions, leading questions, or advice of any kind, other than 'to conceal nothing....' One liberty it has been found necessary to take, namely, to retrench or altogether to omit many details of hunting adventures, of travelling, and other events, which in the simple lives of the Indians have only a moderate share of importance" (p. xix). Unfortunately, it

is no longer possible to tell how much "retrenching" James did, or how much of what Tanner actually said was omitted in James's retelling of what he considered the "simple" lives of the subjects of this narrative. Part two of this volume, encompassing nearly 150 pages, is devoted to such matters as Indian feasts, fasts, dreaming, plants and animals, totems, knowledge of astronomy, numerals, music and poetry, and languages. While there is evidence that Erdrich read and built on part one, the book's narrative portion, she seems not to have made much use of part two. Even the similarities we do find are inexact, as in the names of the months. Edwin James gives the Ottawa and Menomoni names for the months. These are sometimes close to the Ojibwa names Erdrich uses in the chapter titles of *Tracks*, but do not quite match. James, for example, informs us that the Ottawa Mah-ko kee-zis (deer-rutting moon) and the Menomoni Wa-mun-nus-so ka-zho (deer moon) is in Ojibwa Manito o-kee-zis (spirit moon). Erdrich names the first chapter of *Tracks* "Manitou geezisohns," which she translates as Little Spirit Sun, and the fifth chapter "Manitou-geezis," which she translates as Strong Spirit Sun. It is interesting that on the reverse of the title page of *Tracks*, Erdrich informs us that "There are many dialects of Ojibway, or Anishinabe. I have tried to conform to Basil Johnston's excellent *Ojibway Language Lexicon*." Here and in a couple other places I have silently corrected obvious typographical errors such as "beer moon" for "deer moon." My quotations of the names of the months are from page 321 of the 1956 edition (see note 3). From *Tracks* they are from pages 1 and 96 of the HarperFlamingo edition (see note 7).

3. John Tanner, *Captivity of John Tanner* (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, Inc., 1956). This is a numbered limited edition of 2,000 copies. The text is reset but complete, including the ethnographic and linguistic materials in part two. There was apparently some confusion as to the title. The title on the dust jacket of the 1956 edition is *Thirty Years Indian Captivity of John Tanner*, on the spine it is *Indian Captivity of John Tanner*, and on the title page simply *Captivity of John Tanner*. This edition reproduces most of the text of the title page of the 1830 edition, but gives no Library of Congress title. This 1956 edition keeps Edwin James's introductory chapter but prefaces it with a briefer introduction by Western novelist Noel M. Loomis, who conducted independent research on John Tanner's life in the seventeen years after the publication of his narrative (from 1830 to 1847). In her introduction to the abbreviated 1994 Penguin edition, retitled *The Falcon*, Erdrich specifically mentions having read this 1956 edition: "We passed around the Ross & Haines edition until the binding broke and the pages had to be gathered in a heap, secured with rubber bands" (p. xi; see note 4). In 1940 funds provided by the Works Progress Administration enabled the California State Library to issue a typed reprint of the narrative portion of the text, with Edwin James's long introductory chapter and all of part two removed. Editor Paul Radin, in a one-page introduction, justifies the new edition by stating that Tanner's work, though important, "is only inadequately known. In part this is due to its extreme rarity, in part to prejudice against accounts written by white captives." Radin changes the title to *An Indian Captivity (1789–1822): John Tanner's Narrative of His Captivity among the Ottawa and Ojibwa Indians* (San Fransisco: California State Library, 1940; reprint series no. 20, 2 vols.). In 1975 Wilcomb E. Washburn republished the original 1830 volume as volume 46 in the Garland Library of Narratives of North

American Indian Captivities. The Garland reprint includes Edwin James's introduction but has no modern introductory materials. There have been several retellings of Tanner's story through the years. See, for example, James Macaulay, ed., *Grey Hawk: Life and Adventures among the Red Indians* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, n.d.); Walter O'Meara, *The Last Portage* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), reissued as *In the Country of the Walking Dead* (New York: Award Books, 1972); and Catherine Boyd, *Falcon of the Forest* (Minneapolis: T. S. Denison, 1968). There is no evidence that Erdrich was aware of any of these retellings.

4. Louise Erdrich, introduction to *The Falcon: A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), xi. This edition eliminates both Edwin James's 1830 introductory chapter and Loomis's 1956 introduction, though in her own introduction Erdrich refers to and even quotes Loomis's "excellent introduction" to the 1956 edition. Nowhere in the 1994 edition is there any mention made of Edwin James's long and informative introduction or to his important role in transcribing and editing Tanner's story.

5. Ibid., xi.

6. John Tanner, *The Falcon: A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 122–23. Future citations will appear in the text as *N*.

7. Louise Erdrich, *Tracks* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1988), 188. Future citations will appear in the text as *T*.

8. The mention of the moccasin-eating may well have originated in Tanner's *Narrative*, where Tanner refers to certain "little children [who] had that day been compelled to eat their moccasins" (*N* 58).

9. There is reference to Tanner's use of a drum in connection with a different medicine hunt: "Other families beside my own being in distress for the want of food, the Indians called on me to make a medicine hunt. I accordingly told Me-zhick-ko-naum to go for my drum" (p. 202). He uses it to accompany his "prayers and songs," and "the next day I killed a moose." Tanner also refers to the use of a drum in connection with the Waw-be-no ceremony (p. 122).

10. Similar ethnocentric attitudes appear elsewhere, as in the long note that starts on page 181 of Tanner's *Narrative* and continues to page 184. Particularly objectionable are James's statements regarding the "superstitions and absurd fears" (*N* 183n) of the Indians and his description of them as "rude" and as having a "poverty of language" and "blunt" intellects (*N* 184n). Interestingly, Erdrich in her introduction reveals a bit of skepticism about Net-no-kwa's methods: "Neither Tanner nor the reader are [*sic*] ever quite certain whether Net-no-kwa's skills are, indeed, supernatural, or whether, because she is so much more clever and cunning than those around her, that [*sic*] she observes ordinary signs that even the most experienced male hunters commonly miss" (p. xiii).

11. A strictly human character named Na-na-bush also appears in Tanner's *Narrative* as the accomplice who helps Gi-ah-ge-wa-go-mo kidnap Tanner's son (pp. 203–04). The scene has some interesting but very general similarities to the efforts of Boy Lazarre and Clarence Morrissey to abduct Nanapush and Margaret in *Tracks*. Of course, the name of the trickster, Nanabozho, in its various spellings, would have been familiar to Erdrich through various other contexts, such as John A. Grim, *The Shaman: Patterns of Religious Healing among the Ojibway Indians*

(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 85–92.

12. Louise Erdrich, *The Birchbark House* (New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1999). Future citations will appear in the text as *BH*. The book is illustrated by the author. Madeline Island, the setting for the story, is a small island in Lake Superior, home to some of Erdrich's ancestors.

13. The dog-eating business in Tanner's *Narrative* may find distant echoes in Louise Erdrich, *The Antelope Wife* (New York: HarperFlamingo, 1998) particularly in chapter 1, in which a dog named Sorrow is killed to give nourishment to a little girl, and chapter 8, in which the dog named Almost Soup gives a first-person account of having narrowly escaped being killed and eaten by his owners.

14. Readers interested in the history of the genre of autobiography among Plains Indians may want to consult Hertha Dawn Wong, *Sending My Heart Back Across the Years: Tradition and Innovation in Native American Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Wong makes no reference to Tanner's *Narrative* since Tanner is not genetically an Indian, but her account of some of the preliterate forms of autobiography shows interesting contrasts with the written account of Tanner's "adventures." Readers interested in additional materials on the life of John Tanner, particularly after he returned to live in white society, may consult Maxine Benson, "Schoolcraft, James, and the 'White Indian,'" *Michigan History* 54 (1970): 311–28; and John T. Fierst, "Return to 'Civilization': John Tanner's Troubled Years at Sault Ste. Marie," *Minnesota History* 50 (1986): 23–36; and John T. Fierst, "Strange Eloquence: Another Look at *The Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner*," in *Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History*, eds. Jennifer S. H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert (Petersborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, Ltd., 1998), 220–41.