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Unrestricted Territory: Gender, Two Spirits, and Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*

DEIRDRE KEENAN

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. . . . The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*

One night, in Louise Erdrich's novel, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, the main character, Father Damien Modeste, now more than one hundred years old, begins one of his final letters to the pope, this time to reveal the secret of his identity. In it, he recalls the flood that swept Agnes DeWitt away from her deceased lover's farm and the idea that carried her north to the reservation at Little No Horse, confessing, "I now believe in that river I drowned in spirit, but revived. I lost an old life and gained a new."¹ Even before the flood, Agnes had contemplated the "absurd fantasy" of a new missionary life after meeting the other priest—the first Father Damien Modeste—who was traveling to his resented assignment to "missionize the Indians," where, he says, "the devil works with shrewd persistence" and God must enter "the dark mind of the savage."² When she emerges from the flood to find the priest's dead body caught in a branch, Agnes "already knew."³ She puts on the priest's clothes, cuts her hair with a pocketknife, buries the body with her shorn hair ("the keeper of her old life"), and "begins to walk north into the land of the Ojibwe."⁴ For the next eighty years, Father Damien marks the day of his arrival on the reservation as the beginning of "the great lie that

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was her life, the true lie . . . the most sincere lie a person could ever tell.”⁵ That “true lie” is an identity that transgresses the boundaries of mainstream gender norms, an identity that is accepted and honored in the unrestricted territory of the Ojibwe culture.

Mainstream culture, however, is a restricted territory for those who do not adhere to its strictly constructed sex-gender norms. In the United States (and throughout the world), women and men cross sex-gender borders in danger and secrecy, often at personal and professional risk, and always against the sanction of mainstream society.⁶ Even in lesbian and gay communities, transgender people are often reluctantly accepted or overtly excluded.⁷ Yet it is estimated that as many as one in five hundred people experience intense transgender feelings and ultimately cross the border of sex-gender norms through cross-dressing, hormone treatment, and sex reassignment surgery (SRS).⁸⁻⁹ Many more with transgender feelings remain within a restricted territory monitored by mainstream society and unable to cross its constructed boundaries into sex-gender identity freedom. My purpose here is to examine Louise Erdrich’s representation of Father Damien in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* in the context of mainstream attitudes about transgender identities and Native American gender systems. In this context, Erdrich’s novel provides a theory and practice of gender identity formation that challenges mainstream concepts and the intolerance that rises from those concepts.

Transgender is an inclusive term for any individuals who transgress socially constructed gender “norms” or transgress sex identities assigned at birth.¹⁰ Because of their perceived transgression, transgender people face difficult choices in the United States. SRS costs tens of thousands of dollars and is not covered by health insurance.¹¹ Those who seek counseling can be diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder (GID) according to the American Psychiatric Association (APA), a label of “abnormality” that can severely limit access to employment and future health care coverage.¹² Notably, the APA identifies the prevalence of GID as only one in thirty thousand, a blatant underestimate that conceals the reality of transgender prevalence.¹³ According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), only three states have explicit anti-discrimination laws that protect transgender individuals.¹⁴ Only seven states include the transgender population in hate crimes.¹⁵ Antidiscrimination employment laws on the basis of disability exclude transgender, despite its official identification as a *disorder* because it is “not a protected disability.”¹⁶ And only recently have some courts begun to interpret state laws against sex discrimination as including transgender people.¹⁷ Events such as local pride celebrations create temporary sites of liberation and limited protection for transgender people, and neighborhoods in some large urban areas provide territories for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people (LGBT), although these borderlands are vulnerable to acts of harassment and violence against the LGBT population.

The ultimate foundation of this restricted territory for transgender people is the Western-constructed sex-gender dichotomy, which is based on an assumption of only two sexes assigned at birth on the basis of the body with commensurate gender expectations. The hegemony of this constructed

dichotomy is so powerfully reinforced by cultural institutions of law, science, religion, education, and social practice that few in mainstream culture are willing to or capable of imagining a multiple sex-gender system that refuses to see anyone as “deviant.”

The sad thing about this refusal to recognize the *constructed* nature of the Western sex-gender dichotomy is that it suppressed older traditions among many Native American, First Nation, and indigenous cultures that recognized, accepted, and even honored multiple gender identities. The earliest European colonizers observed those Native traditions, and anthropologists documented individuals they identified as Berdaches and Amazons—terms that many Native Americans now regard as “inappropriate and insulting.”¹⁸ Yet colonial culture incorporated none of this Native knowledge into mainstream concepts of sex, gender, sexuality, or community.

Despite pervasive suppression by mainstream culture, many American Indian people and groups have maintained and recuperated their variant sex-gender traditions. Many tribes have alternative gender categories and terms in their own languages. In *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America*, Will Roscoe identifies more than eighty North American groups with documented cases that span a 450-year period since colonization.¹⁹ Jim Elledge has identified more than one hundred alternative sex-gender myths among Native American groups.²⁰ *Berdache* and the less common feminized term, *Amazon*, have been replaced by the pan-Native American term, *Two Spirit*, established by Native Americans.²¹ According to Anguksuar, a Yup'ik Indian activist and artist, the term was officially adopted in 1990, at the third annual spiritual gathering of gay and lesbian Native people in Winnipeg, Canada.²² As Anguksuar explains, the term in no way determines “genital activity”; *Two Spirit* determines “the qualities that define a person’s social role and spiritual gifts.”²³ According to Beverly Little Thunder (Standing Rock Lakota), *Two Spirit* is a term of honor that resists the Western “label of designated *other*.”²⁴ It also represents variant gender traditions that include third and fourth, and perhaps fifth and sixth, gender categories.

Let me briefly acknowledge the problem of language in talking about these traditions. As Alice Kehoe points out, the term *Two Spirit* is not adequate in its translation because of its unintended but implied dichotomy associated with the Western binary.²⁵ Beatrice Medicine (Standing Rock Lakota), an honored elder and anthropologist who recently passed away, wrote that the term is “not intended to be translated from English to native languages” because it “changes the common meaning [the term] has acquired by self-identified two-spirit Native Americans.”²⁶ Historical documentation of cases and current discussion of Two Spirit traditions remain tied linguistically to the binary sex-gender categories in describing, for example, “men acting women” and “women acting men” even though they represent distinct gender categories. Beatrice Medicine also cautioned those who use the term *Two Spirit* to appreciate its association with sacredness and to understand what that means within Native American and First Nation communities.²⁷

Louise Erdrich’s novel *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* provides valuable ways to understand multiple sex-gender systems that resist

the exclusionary, arbitrary, and judgmental nature of the Western dichotomy and what Anguksuar identifies as “the intellectually and spiritually backward view that only two genders exist.”²⁸ In a system of variant gender categories, no one would be forced to live in stealth within the confines of a restricted territory or need to cross unsafe borders to claim a personal gender identity.

A LITERARY JOURNEY ACROSS CULTURAL BORDERS

In “Religion and Gender in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*,” Maria Orban and Alan Velie locate their discussion of Father Damien’s sex-gender identity in three primary contexts: in literary traditions that *play* with characterization, postmodern gender theories, and Native American trickster traditions.²⁹ Each of these contexts illuminates Erdrich’s treatment of Damien in *Last Report*, but each isolates Damien from Two Spirit traditions of gender variance and the related social roles historically defined within Native American cultures. In situating Damien within literary traditions that play with characterization, Orban and Velie cite Erdrich’s non-Native influences and her skill in morphing characters that reappear in multiple stories.³⁰ This perspective helps to distinguish the radical gender alteration that occurs in Damien from Erdrich’s other character changes. But this context also limits gender variance to a literary device and ignores the distinct roles it created within American Indian societies. In situating discussion of Damien in postmodern gender theories, Orban and Velie emphasize gender as construction, performance, and social perspective, as represented in work by Judith Butler and Michel Foucault.³¹ This discussion effectively reveals the illusion of a fixed sex-gender identity location or stability. But locating Damien in this context implies theoretical insight that displaces a system of sex-gender variance among Native American cultures that operated long before modern and postmodern theory. Discussions of Damien as a trickster or shape-shifting figure foregrounds a distinctly cultural role often associated with gender variance in Damien’s characterization, even though Damien is non-Native. However, these discussions also identify Nanapush, Leopolda, and Fleur as tricksters and shape-shifters, a multiplication that diffuses the meanings of those terms.³²

Damien, I argue, embodies Two Spirit traditions shared among many Native American cultures, including the Ojibwe-Anishinaabeg represented in Erdrich’s novel. Placing discussion within this context helps to recuperate Native American understandings of gender identity formation and the transformative potential of those traditions. Agnes’s new identification as Father Damien is no mere whim where she chooses to pass as a Catholic priest merely to enter the land of the Ojibwe. Nor is she transgendered in the sense of feeling that her female body is a mistake of birth that belies a fully masculine psyche (this is admittedly an oversimplification of the complexities in transgender identity formation). As Father Damien, Agnes becomes both male and female, masculine and feminine, and in claiming this identity she responds to a spiritual (not a religious) calling. Admittedly the assertion of a genuine Two Spirit nature is problematic because Father Damien is born Agnes DeWitt, a white woman, into a culture of gender dichotomy (a point I will return to

later). But Damien's refusal to conform to this cultural hegemony and his liberation under the influence of the Ojibwe people demonstrate gender alterity within a multiple sex-gender social system.³³

I propose that Agnes's background as daughter, nun, and lover leads to the discovery of her genuine Two Spirit identity. Part of that discovery—long before she imagines her journey into the land of the Ojibwe—is Agnes's recognition of the constructed nature of gender. She realizes that even as a woman, "the heart of her gender is stretched, pounded, molded, and tempered for its hot task from the age of two."³⁴ For Agnes, then, her gendering in the forge of binary oppositions, her identification as "woman" is no more *natural* than her forged identification as Father Damien.

As Damien travels north to Little No Horse, she notes the respect afforded her maleness and experiences "an ease within her own mind, she'd never felt before."³⁵ When Agnes crosses the borders of the reservation, "she felt a largeness move through her" and already believed that "she had done the right thing. Father Damien Modeste had arrived. . . . The true Modeste who was supposed to arrive—none other. No one else."³⁶

The text's language reflects her transition from Agnes to Father Damien—a transgenering—in shifting pronouns (often within a single sentence). In her first official act, for example, when she performs a mass for the nuns, the text reads, "*She* had only to say the first words and all followed, ordered, instinctive," and "in the silence between the parts of the ritual, Father Damien prayed for those women in *his* charge" (italics added).³⁷ There is, however, no sudden reformation of Father Damien's gender identity. Later that same evening Damien prepares a list of ten "Rules to Assist My Transformation" and begins to replace the learned gestures of womanhood with those of the masculine. The next day, when Agnes is forced to cope with "the misery of concealing the exasperating monthly flow," she suddenly feels "an eerie rocking between two genders."³⁸ In his early years at Little No Horse, Father Damien struggles with the hardships suffered by the Ojibwe, with the miseries of his early misguided efforts and their terrible consequences, and with the emotional residue of transgressing the binary gender dictates of mainstream culture. Here the text reads, "These days, Agnes and Father Damien became one indivisible person in prayer. That poor, divided, human priest enlarged and smoothed into the person of Father Damien."³⁹ At the same time, "it came to her that both Sister Cecelia and Agnes were as heavily manufactured . . . as was Father Damien."⁴⁰ The priest wonders, "Between these two, where was the real self . . . what sifting of identity was she?"⁴¹

AN UNRESTRICTED TERRITORY

I have briefly suggested the ways that Louise Erdrich's Father Damien Modeste represents a Two Spirit concept characteristic of shared Native American traditions that displace the Western sex-gender dichotomy. This assertion immediately raises the question: How can a white Catholic missionary represent Native American tradition? The representation of traditional gender variance is not solely dependent on the subject of Father Damien.

More importantly, the representation substantially depends on ways the Anishinaabeg at Little No Horse perceive him and recognize his Two Spirit status. That is, Two Spirit traditions represent an understanding of gender variance and familiar categories to absorb various identities. When the Ojibwe man first meets Father Damien at the train stop, for example, Kashpaw immediately perceives a “girlish openness” in the priest. And during much of the journey into the heart of Little No Horse, Kashpaw maintains a thoughtful silence as he considers the priest’s gender:

[H]e sensed something unusual about the priest from the first. Something wrong. The priest was clearly not right, too womanly. Perhaps, he thought, here was a man like the famous Wishkob, the Sweet, who had seduced many other men and finally joined the family of a great war chief as a wife, where he lived until old, well loved, as one of the women. Kashpaw himself had addressed Wishkob as grandmother. The priest is unusual, but then, who among the zhaaga-naashiwag [white people] is not strange.⁴²

Kashpaw’s sense of “something wrong,” of something “clearly not right,” signals no disapproval. It reveals only a discrepancy between Damien’s presentation as a Catholic priest and his gender as “too womanly.” Kashpaw’s quick association with the famous Wishkob the Sweet signals a ready context for Kashpaw’s understanding of Damien’s gender identification. That Kashpaw recalls his own address to the “grandmother” implies his easy acceptance of the priest’s gender variance. It also indicates the honored role of the Two Spirit among the Ojibwe as one “who was well loved.” The reference to his seduction of many men and his marriage to the great war chief indicates acceptance of same-sex relationships and same-sex marriage. Most importantly, Kashpaw’s association reveals Father Damien’s potential Two Spirit status among the Ojibwe, a status independent of blood quotient.

At their first meeting, Fleur, too, sees an “unmanly priest,” and Nanapush finds him “oddly feminine.”⁴³ Never, in these initial meetings, do the Ojibwe confront the priest about his gender identity. In fact, Father Damien spends a decade believing that no one knows his secret because he has learned to conceal his femaleness. So he is completely caught off guard during a game of chess with his old friend when Nanapush suddenly asks, “What are you . . . a man priest or a woman priest?”⁴⁴ For Nanapush, the question about gender identity is mere tactic to distract Father Damien from the chess game so that he can claim victory. But for Damien, the question opens up years of suppressed anxiety and emotional residue from the deviance of passing. Seeing the priest’s “terror and confusion,” however, Nanapush gently continues, asking Damien, “Why . . . are you pretending to be a man priest?”⁴⁵

Their conversation reveals the long Ojibwe tradition of recognizing variant gender identities beyond dichotomy and, more notably, respecting them. Nanapush tells Father Damien, “[W]e used to talk about it, Kashpaw and myself, but when we noticed that you never mentioned it, we spoke of this to no one else.”⁴⁶ Still Nanapush expresses his curiosity by asking, “Are you

a female Wishkob? My old friend thought so at first, assumed you went and became a four-legged to please another man, but that's not true. Inside that robe, you are definitely a woman."⁴⁷ Grappling with his own self-consciousness, Damien tries to escape back into the chess game, but Nanapush pursues the conversation; "So you're not a woman-acting man, you're a man-acting woman."⁴⁸ Nanapush's conjectures reveal the Ojibwe assumption of third and fourth gender categories, as well as additional categories, which include gay men and, by implication, lesbians. They also reaffirm Damien's accepted status within the Two Spirit tradition among the Ojibwe at Little No Horse.

Moreover, Nanapush's curiosity to understand Father Damien and his assurance that "when we noticed that you never mentioned it, we spoke of it to no one else" illustrate the respect (rather than scorn in mainstream culture) awarded to identification within the Two Spirit tradition. And his note that he and his Ojibwe wife, Margaret, remember only a few man-acting women such as Father Damien emphasizes the role of elders as cultural memory in maintaining suppressed traditions. In *Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures*, Sabine Lang points out that often traditions of gender variance were forgotten, denigrated, or repressed with the "massive impact of Western culture" and the Christianization process.⁴⁹ Notably, the only Ojibwe person on the reservation who scorns Father Damien and attempts to blackmail him on the basis of gender is Leopolda, a converted religious zealot turned nun. All of the other Ojibwe respect Father Damien's gender identification and his apparent desire for secrecy, necessitated by the intolerance of the Catholic Church and mainstream culture.

In contrast, the outsider, Father Jude, a papal emissary sent to investigate Leopolda's background, has no cultural frame of reference to absorb the gender alterity he too senses in Father Damien. Here in one of his first conversations with Father Damien, Father Jude experiences sudden insight but immediately dismisses it: "In that instant, a strange thing happened. He saw inhabiting the same cassock as the priest, an old woman. . . . He shook his head, craned forward, but no, there was Damien again."⁵⁰ Later Father Jude again senses a gender discrepancy when "a troubling sensation once more came upon him . . . a problem of perception. A distinct uncanny sense he could only name in one way" (146). Again Father Jude forces his perception into the familiar dichotomy by asking Father Damien if he has a twin.⁵¹ For Father Jude the possibility of a female twin could account for a perceived gender discrepancy with the priest's male body. Father Jude's nagging suspicion of some unidentifiable secrecy surrounding the priest resolves itself when he discovers Damien's name inadvertently recorded as father/parent on a birth certificate. For Jude, the assumption of violated celibacy makes far more sense than gender variants he cannot begin to imagine or tolerate within mainstream culture and the institution of the priesthood.⁵²

Similarly, when Father Gregory, another outsider, discovers the female body concealed under Damien's cassock and finds their attraction irresistible, he pleads with *Agnes* to run away with him, marry, and have children. But *Damien* refuses by explaining, "I cannot leave who I am."⁵³ For Gregory, angered by the refusal, Damien's gender is not negotiable. "You are a woman,"

he insists, invoking the mainstream dichotomy.⁵⁴ When Damien asserts, “I am a priest . . . I am nothing but a priest,” Gregory lashes out at Damien’s gender transgression in “the worst way he could summon. . . . You’re a sacrilege.”⁵⁵ Gregory’s anger reflects the dominant hegemony of a sex-gender system that refuses variance within a Catholic context that prohibits female priesthood and in a social context that scripts specific roles for women and men and condemns deviance.⁵⁶ Gregory’s condemnation demonstrates the consequence of that refusal. As Will Roscoe points out in *Changing Ones*, “When one believes that sex is given by nature in two incommensurable forms, the attitude toward that which is non-binary shifts from ambivalence and awe to horror and scorn.”

After the affair with Father Gregory when Damien spirals into suicidal despair, Nanapush provides the traditions that can reconcile the priest’s divided self and prepares a sweat lodge. Here, surrounded by Ojibwe men, Damien finds peace. Although the priest acknowledged that “according to Church doctrine it was wrong for a priest to worship god in so alien space, Agnes simply found herself comforted.”⁵⁷ She emerges a recuperated Father Damien who “not only loved the people but also the very thingness of the world,” signified by a language “unprejudiced by gender distinctions.”⁵⁸ Damien re-signs the world in Ojibwe terms as inanimate or animate, “a quality harboring a spirit,” which resists binary reduction between alive or dead, for “amid the protocols of [this] language, there is room for personal preference.”⁵⁹ As Will Roscoe writes, “As long as the language for talking about gender is confined to mutually exclusive binary terms,” those who are different are reduced to “defective, counterfeit, or imitation men and women.”⁶⁰ *Anishinaabemowen* (Ojibwe language) provides terms that refuse a gender dichotomy bound to the biological body and instead admits multiple variations freed from the body and animated by spirit. Moreover, his inclusion in an exclusively male ceremony shows that the Ojibwe men identify and accept Damien’s Two Spirit status.⁶¹

GENDER ALTERITY AS POWER⁶²

At the end of the conversation I referred to earlier, when he finally confronts the priest about his gender, Nanapush concludes, “[T]hat is what your spirits instructed you to do, so you must do it. Your spirits must be powerful to require such a sacrifice.”⁶³ Nanapush’s understanding of a spiritually motivated gender identity reflects one of the most important elements in Two Spirit traditions. As Lester Brown writes in *Spiritual Warriors*, “gender” in many Native American cultures is a spiritual calling, “not determined by a person’s anatomy.”⁶⁴ According to Brown, “individuals who are spiritually called into gender variance are believed to have special powers . . . because of the difference.”⁶⁵ Duane Champagne also emphasizes the “sacredness of alternative gender” founded on an individual’s personal mission.⁶⁶ In Louise Erdrich’s novel, Agnes believes there was something spiritually ordained in the moment she emerges from the flood and puts on a dead priest’s cassock to cross into the Little No Horse reservation. Among the Ojibwe, Damien is able to realize a true Two Spirit identity.

Another element among Two Spirit traditions is a common role as mediators. Will Roscoe explains a distinction from concepts of androgyny that function only as “a mediating device in the essentialism of binaries.”⁶⁷ Within the system of gender dichotomy, he asserts, “androgyny can never be the ontological basis for a social identity.”⁶⁸ In this system, “What disappears,” Roscoe states, is “the materiality of the third [gender]—the actual roles, identities, and lifestyles based on those mediating devices.”⁶⁹ Historically, among Native cultures, he notes, “individuals seen as bridging genders were often elected to perform other mediations as well.”⁷⁰

Father Damien performs many mediations. As a Catholic missionary, he mediates between Christianity and Ojibwe sacred beliefs and practices. But it is not to bring the Ojibwe to Christianity (for he had come to think of conversion as a “most loving form of destruction”).⁷¹ Rather, Father Damien’s mediation reveals the limits of Christian orthodoxy, the recuperative potential of Ojibwe spirituality, and the possibility of a spirituality that arises from two traditions. Ultimately, however, Damien personally rejects Christian dogma, including its concepts of evil and redemption, choosing, in the end, to enter the Ojibwe heaven.⁷²

In developing an Ojibwe dictionary, Father Damien also mediates between mainstream and traditional Ojibwe cultures. But again his translations serve to displace mainstream concepts with Ojibwe meanings. When Father Jude asks him, for example, about rumors of scandals on the reservation, Damien says that he “prefers to think of them as profound exchanges of human love.”⁷³ He points out to Father Jude that “the Ojibwe word for the human vagina is derived from the word for ‘earth,’” and adds, “a profound connection, don’t you think?”⁷⁴ Surprised by Damien’s apparent lack of moral judgment, Father Jude asks if he “condones such irregular behavior,” a question that reveals mainstream puritanical attitudes toward sexuality and the body. Damien answers, “I do not condone it . . . I *cherish* such occurrences, or help my charges to at least” (italics added).⁷⁵ In his mediation between Father Jude’s mainstream brand of sexual morality and his own understanding under Ojibwe influence, Damien rejects Jude’s simplistic binary system—right and wrong, black and white, male and female. Life as a priest among the Ojibwe and his proficiency in Anishinaabemowen has fundamentally restructured Damien’s sense of reality, wherein truth is subjective, matters of right and wrong are always gray, and the only real, immoral actions are those that hurt others.⁷⁶

In each of his mediations between mainstream and Ojibwe culture—in matters of spirituality, faith, conversion, language, culture, and morality—Father Damien provides not merely opposing opinions on mainstream issues but new meanings. Similarly, in matters of gender, Native American traditions provide new meanings. As Will Roscoe writes, the Two Spirit tradition “is not merely a matter of different judgments of the same phenomenon, but completely different perceptions of what that phenomenon is.”⁷⁷ Likewise, Louise Erdrich’s transformation of Father Damien Modeste out of Agnes DeWitt (or Agnes out of Father Damien in *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*, Erdrich’s earlier novels) provides a close look at gender variance.⁷⁸ Erdrich’s novel also

provokes reconsiderations about what sex and gender mean and how they operate in identity formation; why mainstream culture guards the borders of gender dichotomy and punishes transgression; and why mainstream society continues to endorse ideas that promote intolerance and violence against individuals perceived to transgress those ideas.

One additional example that illuminates Two Spirit traditions occurs in the context of Father Damien's retelling the story of Leopolda's genealogy.⁷⁹ The cruelty that marks Leopolda's nature begins three generations earlier in a feud that develops between a hunting party of Ojibwe and French traders, which included her ancestors, and a Bawaanug (Lakota) hunting party. To avert a battle, Leopolda's grandfather, a French trader, challenges any Bawaanug man to best his wife (Leopolda's Ojibwe grandmother) in a running contest, with death to the loser. The Bawaanug choose one of their fastest runners, a *winkte*, a "woman-man," an *ikwe-inini* in Ojibwe, after a long debate as to whether the *winkte* can count as a man for the purpose of the race.⁸⁰ Although several Ojibwe initially contest the *winkte*'s participation due to his female spirit, others conclude that "as the *winkte* would run with legs that grew down along either side of a penis . . . he was enough of a male to suit the terms."⁸¹

The passage reveals three characteristics of Two Spirit traditions. First, the inclusion of the Lakota term, *winkte*, and the Ojibwe term, *ikwe-inini*, shows that both cultures recognize a third gender category. Second, the debate occurs *only* for the purpose of the race, suggesting that sex-gender categorization is not fixed, limited, or generally required. Third, no one in either party reacts when the *winkte*, adorned with a tortoiseshell hand mirror around his neck and eyes rimmed with smoky black, shrugs off his deer hide dress to reveal a body "astonishingly pure and lovely, in nothing but a white woman's lace-trimmed pantalets."⁸² The lack of reaction to the *winkte*'s appearance suggests the familiarity of cross-dressing in multiple gender practice.

THE ETHICS OF CROSSING BORDERS

In the first chapter in the anthology *Two Spirit People*, the editors address the motive of research into Native American gender diversity and sexuality.⁸³ They acknowledge the ethical implications of writing about Native American alternative gender categories when some "American Indian scholars, academics, political leaders, and others are not sympathetic and in fact would prefer the issue be dropped."⁸⁴ Beatrice Medicine and Beverly Little Thunder, among many others, have commented on the kinds of discrimination, isolation, alienation, and punishment many Native Americans suffer within their own cultures because of attitudes transposed from mainstream culture.⁸⁵ Beatrice Medicine has also raised concerns about the romanticization and misrepresentation of Native American gender and sexuality.⁸⁶ Others address the appropriation of Native traditions for personal gain and the stereotyping of Native *icons of liberation*. These are important considerations if we are to learn anything about respect from Native American concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality and, at the same time, avoid neocolonialism.

At the same time, Duane Champagne argues that “Native traditions provide cultural resources for the reevaluation of sexuality and gender relations.”⁸⁷ “The gift of sacred being,” marked by gender variance, Champagne says, “can be carried as a gift to the world.”⁸⁸ Champagne asserts a responsibility even to grant access to Two Spirit knowledge and wisdom to others whose traditions are not so inclusive.⁸⁹ Louise Erdrich’s representation of Father Damien and the Ojibwe people of Little No Horse provides that access.

Erdrich’s novel cannot provide a panacea for the gender troubles in mainstream culture. It is fiction, after all. In the endnotes to *The Last Report*, Erdrich anticipates her readers’ skepticism about the possibility of “a lifelong gender disguise” and cites a work of nonfiction on a transgender subject. Erdrich also comments on the source of her fiction, acknowledging a voice that spoke to her in dreams, as if mediating the stories. She writes, “I feel sure they originated in my own mind, those stories. . . . Yet sometimes, as I scrutinize the handwriting in those early drafts, I wonder. Who is the writer? Who is the voice?”⁹⁰ Deliberately confusing the border between fiction and nonfiction, Erdrich intimates the transformative potential of fiction, the power of stories to direct our lives.

Just as American Indian wisdom reshapes mainstream understanding of storytelling, history, spirituality, kinship, environment, and community, it can also reshape concepts of sex, gender, and identity. Still, a society that legislates discrimination against the transgendered is a long way from a society whose legislation prohibits discrimination, and this is a far cry from a culture that even without legislation values gender variance. In the current political struggles between those who advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights and those who would amend suppressive and exclusive legislation, Native American Two Spirit traditions—whether represented in fiction or nonfiction—could mediate a vision where all individuals’ gender identities and sexualities could be honored.

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NOTES

1. Louise Erdrich, *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 41.
2. *Ibid.*, 35–36.
3. *Ibid.*, 44.

4. Ibid., 44–45.

5. Ibid., 61.

6. Blackwood and Wieringa's *Female Desires* and Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Warriors* are among many texts that look at transgender roles across international cultures.

7. At the recent Women's World Congress June 2005 in Seoul, Korea, a session on the young lesbian activist movement erupted in heated argument over including transgendered women in lesbian activist groups, reflecting a recent position among some lesbian separatists to exclude and attack transgender interests as a threat to a lesbian agenda.

8. *Transgender feelings* refer to any type of feeling that one's body and/or sex assigned at birth is incommensurate with one's psychological and emotional sense of self. They are by no means limited to a desire for reassignment as the opposite sex.

9. Lynn Conway, "How Frequently Does Transsexualism Occur?," <http://www.lynnconway.com> (accessed 26 May 2005). Lynn Conway is Professor Emerita at the University of Michigan and a male to female (MtF) transsexual, whose personal experience and professional research provides an excellent source on transgender and transsexual issues.

10. The term, *transgender*, is sometimes intended to include those who transgress heterosexuality (i.e., homosexuals).

11. I want to emphasize here that transgender is not limited to the desire for sex reassignment or to the notion that only two genders exist.

12. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed., rev., DSM-IV-TR (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000), 576. The APA defines GID as "a strong and persistent cross-gender identification, which is the desire to be, or the insistence that one is, of the other sex." Notably, the APA limits the definition of GID to gender association with the opposite sex, instead of considering the broader and more inclusive definitions given by transgender individuals.

13. Ibid., 579. The APA cites no prevalence studies in the United States or considers the wide spectrum of transgender expression; its estimate of one in thirty thousand is based on European studies of individuals who sought SRS.

14. Nan D. Hunter, Courtney G. Joslin, and Sharon M. McGowan, eds., *The Rights of Lesbians, Gay Men, Bisexuals and Transgender People: An American Civil Liberties Union Handbook* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004). The three states with explicit protections for transgender people are Minnesota (1993), Rhode Island (2001), and New Mexico (2003), 172–73.

15. Ibid., 172. Those seven states with hate crimes amended to include transgender people are Minnesota, California, Hawaii, Missouri, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and Vermont.

16. Ibid., 172–91. The ACLU handbook on LGBT rights outlines in detail what legal protections do and do not cover transgender people.

17. Ibid., 174.

18. Sue Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, eds. *Two Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 3.

19. Will Roscoe, *The Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 213–22.

20. Jim Elledge, ed., *Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Myths from the Arapaho to the Zuni* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

21. In *Grandmothers of the Light: A Medicine Woman's Source* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo) explains her understanding of pan-Native spiritual traditions, writing, "I have believed for some time that the similarities in world view and spiritual understanding are marked because the supernaturals that live on this continent with us possess marked similarities among themselves, and so their teachings are similar, varying because of locale and because of the language and histories of the various people they instruct" (205). She goes on to assert that the emphasis on distinctly different Native cultures is colonially motivated to divide American Indian people (205–6).

22. Jacobs, *Two Spirit People*, 221.

23. *Ibid.*, 221.

24. *Ibid.*, 203.

25. *Ibid.*, 269.

26. *Ibid.*, 147.

27. *Ibid.*, 148.

28. *Ibid.*, 218.

29. Maria Orban and Alan Velie, "Religion and Gender in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*," *European Review of Native American Studies* 17, no. 2 (2003), 27–34. For further discussion, see also Thomas Matchie, "Miracles at Little No Horse: Louise Erdrich's Answer to Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues," *North Dakota Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (Spring 2003).

30. *Ibid.*, 27.

31. *Ibid.*, 28.

32. *Ibid.*, 27–28. See also Kate McCafferty, "Generative Adversity: Shapeshifting, Pauline/Leopolda in *Tracks* and *Love Medicine*," *American Indian Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (Fall 1997), 729–51.

33. Throughout my discussion, I employ the masculine pronoun in reference to the character as Father Damien. Social protocol honors a transgendered individual's choice of gender identification (or without gender identification) regardless of the gender assigned at birth.

34. Erdrich, *Miracles at Little No Horse*, 18.

35. *Ibid.*, 62.

36. *Ibid.*, 65.

37. *Ibid.*, 68.

38. *Ibid.*, 78.

39. *Ibid.*, 109.

40. *Ibid.*, 76.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, 64.

43. *Ibid.*, 85.

44. *Ibid.*, 230.

45. *Ibid.*, 231.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*, 231. Nanapush's initial impression that Damien may be one who "became a four-legged to please a man" is a reference to same-sex sexual relations, which constitutes its own identity category. The description again implies no

disapproval within the Ojibwe culture, which views humans and animals as spiritually equal members of the creation.

48. *Ibid.*, 232.

49. Sabine Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 107.

50. Erdrich, *Last Report*, 139.

51. *Ibid.*, 146.

52. Orban and Velie note that Jude “cannot recognize what he sees because his perceptions are governed by his expectations” of a man in a cassock (29). I suggest that his expectations are hegemonic and deeply rooted in the Western gender dichotomy, which is his only frame of reference.

53. *Ibid.*, 206.

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*, 207.

56. Orban and Velie argue that Damien is unique among female characters in her rejection of scripted gender roles. They suggest that other female characters desire “manly” displays by men, citing Pauline’s mother (30). Their assertion on this point fails to recognize the traditionally equal status of women and men among the Ojibwe (especially before white influence) or to consider Fleur and Margaret’s fiery strength in this context.

57. *Ibid.*, 215.

58. *Ibid.*, 215 and 257.

59. *Ibid.*, 257.

60. Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 210.

61. I am indebted for Anishinaabe teachings to Sidney Martin (Potawatomi), George Martin (Ojibwe), Shannon Martin (Ojibwe-Potawatomi), Lorraine, Dave, and Carly Shananaquet (Ojibwe-Potawatomi), Edward Benton-Benai, and the people of the Midewiwin Lodge. As it has been taught to me, the Ojibwe sweat-lodge ceremony does not exclude women (although the Ojibwe view menses as women’s natural ceremony of purification). Rather, sweat-lodge ceremonies are conventionally gender segregated, so the fact that Damien enters with men shows an acceptance of his chosen identity within a variant gender system.

62. Alterity as power is a concept Gloria Anzaldua discusses throughout *Borderlands*. Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999).

63. Erdrich, *Last Report*, 232.

64. Lester Brown, ed. *Two Spirit People: American Indian Lesbian Women and Gay Men* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1997), 5.

65. *Ibid.*, 10.

66. *Ibid.*, xix.

67. Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 208.

68. *Ibid.*, 208.

69. *Ibid.*

70. *Ibid.*

71. Erdrich, *Last Report*, 55.

72. Orban and Velie assert that Father Damien “remains a Catholic while adopting beliefs of the Chippewa religion” (31). Ann-Janine Morey also discusses

Damien's merging of religion systems, in her review of the novel, *Christian Century* 118, no. 26 (September 2001), 36, "Boost," <http://0-web17.epnet.com.pioecat.cc.edu> (accessed 5 January 2006).

73. *Ibid.*, 134.

74. *Ibid.*

75. *Ibid.*

76. *Ibid.*, 135. See also Kate McCafferty for further discussion on the ambiguity of Chippewa binary concepts.

77. Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 210.

78. In *Tracks* (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 1988), published thirteen years before the 2001 publication of *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Louise Erdrich tells the stories of the same characters, focused on the year Father Damien arrives on the reservation. In *Tracks*, Father Damien is identified only as a male priest, but owns subtle personal traits that anticipate the revelation of a Two Spirit identity in the later novel.

79. Erdrich, *Last Report*, 149.

80. *Ibid.*, 153–54.

81. *Ibid.*, 154.

82. *Ibid.*, 155. Although they acknowledge Erdrich's representation of the winkte within "a scale of degrees of maleness, not an either/or binary opposition" and that "biology alone is not the decisive factor [in gender identity]," Orban and Velie mistakenly characterize, I believe, the winkte as a "social construction based on the perception of negative female stereotypes from a male perspective" (31), a characterization that reifies the binary opposition and ignores Two Spirit traditions.

83. Jacobs, *Two Spirit People*, 23.

84. *Ibid.*, 26. Elsewhere I have written about a broad range of ethical issues in "Trespassing Native Ground: Problems of Non-Native Work in American Indian Studies," *M/MLA, Fall/Winter 2000–2001*, 3–4, no. 33–34, 179–89.

85. *Ibid.*, 147 and 206.

86. Jacobs, *Two Spirit People*, 147.

87. Brown, *American Indian Lesbian Women and Gay Men*, xxi.

88. *Ibid.*, xix.

89. *Ibid.*, xxiii.

90. Erdrich, *Last Report*, 358.