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Resistance of Cultural Ghettoisation through Indigenous Cosmology in Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman*

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Abstract

Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* embeds Chippewa/Ojibwe cosmology into a 1950s political struggle over Indian termination. Spiritual presences, land and non-human beings make visible an indigenous world where kinship and sovereignty extend beyond the human and beyond linear history. The Pulitzer winning novel is based on the life of her grandfather, the titular character of the novel, who lives in Turtle Mountain Reservation, North Dakota. Erdrich presents a worldview where "the mythical and the rational coexist," with ghosts, talking animals, and visionary powwows appearing as ordinary parts of reality rather than fantasy. These indigenous people lived in perfect harmony with Nature and successfully guarded their secret of cosmology from the outside world. Indigenous cosmology in the novel appears through ghosts and vision, land-as-kin, more-than-human community, and a non-linear sense of time. These cosmological elements are not merely decorative but serve as the epistemological and ethical foundation for resistance, identity, and survival in the face of colonial violence. This article shows how indigenous cosmology helps in their resilience and reacted against their cultural ghettoisation.

Key words: Indigenous Cosmology, Indian termination, Chippewa People, Turtle Mountain Reservation, Cultural ghettoisation.

Introduction

The Native American culture is one that is steeped in history and tradition. Ever since its inception, the people who come under the umbrella of Native American tribes have fiercely and successfully guarded their secrets from the world outside. Indigenous cosmogony refers to the belief systems and narratives that describe the origin and development of the universe, including the earth, life, and humanity. These narratives are deeply embedded in the cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and worldviews of Indigenous peoples around the globe. While each Indigenous community has its

unique stories, they often share common themes and elements that shape their understanding of existence.

Based on events from the life of Erdrich's grandfather, *The Night Watchman* is about tribal chairman Thomas Wazhashk's efforts to fight against the push for Indian termination in 1953, which would have ignored prior U.S.-Native American treaties and resulted in the dispossession of Native American lands. Thus, the novel serves as a retrieval and commemoration of history as much as it is a work of fiction.The book opens in **September 1952** and starts by introducing the main characters, all of whom live at the Turtle Mountain reservation.

In *The Night Watchman*, Louise Erdrich presents Indigenous spirituality not as a relic of the past, but as a dynamic political shield against the mid-century "Termination" policies that sought to dissolve tribal identity.By anchoring the characters in a worldview where the land is sentient and ancestors are present, Erdrich shows how spirituality prevents cultural ghettoization—the state of being isolated, marginalized, and reduced to a "vanishing" or static curiosity within broader society.

The primary conflict involves around the "Termination Bill" where the U.S. government viewed the Turtle Mountain Band as a bureaucratic problem to be "emancipated". Thomas Wazhashk's political fight is seen as a continuation of this sacred, ordinary duty to protect the world. The titular character of the novel - Thomas Wazhashk reminds us of the creation myths. His surname, Wazhashk, means "muskrat," an essential animal in Chippewa origin stories. He recounts the story of the Creator lining up the animals that were the best divers and asking them, one by one, to dive into the water and find the bottom. All the animals failed, until the humble water rat, who dove so deep and for so long that he drowned but still managed to grasp a paw of mud, from which the Creator made the whole earth.

These are foundational narratives that explain how the world began and set the framework for understanding existence. In many Indigenous cultures, these myths involve a divine creator or an ensemble of supernatural beings who bring the world into being from chaos or nothingness. Within these myths lies an intrinsic relationship between humans and nature; often, humans are seen as an integral part of creation rather than separate from it. The land itself may be considered sacred, imbued with spiritual significance. This perspective fosters a sense of stewardship and responsibility toward the environment. According to their belief the land is a "living matter" that holds the history of the people. They do not claim to possess the land; rather, they belong **to** it. This perspective turns the legal battle into a sacred duty—Thomas isn't just fighting for "real estate," he is fighting to maintain the community's role as the land's protectors.

Erdrich's narrative blurs the lines between history and fiction, presenting ghosts, talking animals, and spiritual visions as ordinary aspects of reality. This magical realist mode is rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems, where the boundaries between the material and spirit worlds are "thin and permeable," and ancestral presences are part of daily life.

The world of Thomas and Patrice is a spectral one. Roderick is an itinerant ghost who occasionally breaks into the novel, mostly appearing during Thomas' night watch. We learn his backstory midway—he was a young Indian classmate of Thomas who was locked in the cellar by their missionary teacher and did not survive. His death is a consequence of the assimilation that white Christian settlers imposed upon Indians and illustrates that the violence of colonialism exists not only in physical world, but also persists in the afterworld. Roderick is not the only ghost. When he travels to D.C., he finds himself in a city full of Indian ghosts.

Thomas's father, Biboon, speaks of time as a holy element. This reflects a non-linear Indigenous worldview where the past (ancestors) and the future (descendants) are simultaneously present in the current moment.

While many characters struggle with the influence of the "modern" world, Patrice's mother, Zhaanat, represents the raw, unadulterated core of Anishinaabe spirituality. Zhaanat possesses deep knowledge of traditional medicines like bear root, prairie sage, and sweetgrass. Her connection to the land is a form of spiritual resistance against the government's attempts to "terminate" the tribe's identity.

At one point, Zhaanat facilitates a spiritual search for Patrice's missing sister, Vera. She invites her cousin Gerald a jiisikid, a traditional Anishinaabe (Chippewa) medicine man or "shaking tent" seer. His presence highlights the novel's theme of Indigenous spirituality as a living, practical tool for survival. When the Paranteau family is desperate for news of Vera, who has vanished in the "big city" of Minneapolis, they turn to Gerald. He performs a ceremony to locate her spirit. During the ceremony, Gerald "flies" across the earth in a spiritual state. He returns with a vision, telling the family that Vera is alive but suffering—specifically, that he saw her lying in a ditch with a baby beside her.

In a world where the government and police often ignore the plight of missing Indigenous women, Gerald provides the only reliable information the family has. His vision is what ultimately prompts Patrice to make her perilous journey to Minneapolis to rescue her sister. Unlike the younger characters who are navigating the "white-people world" of factory jobs and boxing, Gerald is a keeper of the old ways. He represents the ability of the Turtle Mountain people to see beyond the physical boundaries of the reservation and the limitations imposed on them by the U.S. government.

Senator Watkins justifies the bill by claiming Indigenous culture is dead or irrelevant. Characters like Zhaanat (Patrice's mother) refute this simply by existing in a spiritual reality that the Senator cannot perceive. Her ability to "see" Vera through dreams or provide medicine is a form of epistemological resistance—it proves their way of knowing is still potent and functional.

While Thomas goes outside to do his rounds, he looks for Ikwe Anang, the "woman star", the presence of which marked the end of his shift. The morning star is a symbol of the ancestors in Native American cultures. They link the symbolism of this star to their elders, past spirits, and ancestors. Many native Americans believe that each star is an ancestor above watching over us.

Thomas, disturbed from his nighttime nap by the sound of drumming, leaves the factory and witnesses shining people amidst the stars dancing in formation. He soon joins them in dancing, wearing a radiant headdress and singing. The drum beat also holds significance in Native American custom; tribes use drums in daily life and in ceremonies. Many tribes believe that the beat of the drums represent the unwavering pulse of Mother Earth. Drum beats accompany a song so the dancers can keep the rhythm of the dance.It is a kind of manifestation of some sort. It turns into a spiritual moment for Thomas, as he imagines the stars/spirits above him are dancing and him dancing with them, turning into a powwow. (The inclusion of Jesus Christ along with his other spiritual guides shows how the influence of Christianity has become a part of him, too.) It's a moment for him to draw strength and resilience from his spirituality and from those who came before him (the stars/spirits).

Near the end of the novel, Millie Cloud and Juggie are working late at night in an office but are disturbed by sounds of voices. They exit the building and are astonished by a display of northern lights dancing across the sky. Juggie tells Millie that the lights are dancing spirits looking after them.

These cosmic encounters are examples of a kind of ancestral and spiritual intervention into the present human moment. They encourage the human characters and instill knowledge that they are being benevolently watched over and cared for by ancestral spirits. The presence of the cosmos is a continual reminder of intergenerational survival and life.

The novel emphasizes the interconnectedness of humans, animals, and the land, reflecting Ojibwe cosmology's biocentric equality and community consciousness. Land is not just a backdrop but

a living relative and memory-holder, filled with the presence of ancestors and non-human kin. This more-than-human relationality is central to the community's identity and resistance

Native American culture considers the white owl a symbol of death. Some tribes believed that white owls were actually night eagles because they were quite large birds who could see in the night sky.Many tribes across the country not only believe that owls have a correlation to death, but also the afterlife. Tribes such as the Lakota, Omaha, Cheyenne, Fox, Ojibwa, Menominee, Cherokee, and Creek consider owls to be either an embodied spirit of the dead or associated with a spirit in some way.

The owl that visits Thomas is a recurring symbol in the novel. While LaBette interprets the owl as a negative sign of death, Thomas appears to be on good terms with the owl and welcome its presence during his lonely night shifts. Like the owl, Thomas is nocturnal, keeping guard of the factory and writing letters to persuade people in power to support their fight against termination. The owl shares Thomas' solitude and symbolizes the mental and psychic loneliness of his battle.

Most Native American tribes revere the bear. Like the turtle, each tribe's cultural view of the bear varies; however, at the core, the bear represents authority, good medicine, courage, and strength. The bear is said to be a healer and protector.

Many tribes cut their hair when there is a death in the immediate family as **an outward symbol of the deep sadness** and a physical reminder of the loss. The cut hair represents the time with their loved one, which is over and gone, and the new growth is the life after.Thomas thinks back to his days in school. His mother had cried as she cut off his braid — something typically only done when someone had died — before sending him off. However, she knew they would cut it off at the school, so she did it herself so at least she could keep it. In order for him to attend schooling, Thomas and his family were subjected to the indignity of having their culture and customs disrespected. This section serves as an illustration of how the government had been chipping away at the Native American identity long before the termination bill was passed.

Erdrich uses color symbolism to bridge the gap between the harsh, gray reality of 1950s poverty and the vibrant, pulsing world of Anishinaabe spirituality. Colors serve as a visual language for resistance, signaling when a character is in touch with their power or when they are being "faded out" by the state.

The Red colour mainly symbolised violence, war, blood, wounds, strength, energy, power and success in war paint but as face paint, it symbolised happiness and beauty. Red appears in the traditional medicines Zhaanat gathers. It symbolizes the "heartbeat" of the land and the vitality required to fight the Termination Bill.The colors of the U.S. government and the Termination Bill are intentionally dull. This is the visual representation of cultural ghettoisation.The letters, the bills, and the offices in Washington D.C. are described in "dusty" tones—grays, tans, and faded blacks. This represents the "living death" the government wants for the tribe: to turn a vibrant, colorful culture into a gray, assimilated mass.

It is still taken as a colour of strength and victory. In the olden times, warriors were said to put black war paint on their faces to symbolise victory, they also were used to indicate the prowess of the individual wearing it. White while widely taken as a symbol of mourning also indicated peace and purity.Yellow was believed to be a positive colour. It indicated the bravery of the wearer and the fact that he was willing to fight to death. Apart from these two connotations, yellow was also used to indicate death and intellect. The colour green indicated endurance. Green is associated with harmony and is believed to have healing powers.The colour blue symbolises confidence, wisdom and authority.Erdrich often describes the winter landscape of North Dakota with "blue shadows" on the snow. This isn't just a visual detail; blue represents the presence of spirits (like Roderick) who inhabit the cold, quiet spaces.

The Chippewa tribes consider the colours blue, white, yellow, and black very important as they represent the four sacred mountains. The eastern mountains are represented by white, the southern mountains by blue, the western mountains by yellow, and the northern mountains by black. They believed the white mountains signified mornings, and the yellow stood for dusk. Black signified the night and blue signified dawn.

For Erdrich, the government's attempt at Termination is an attempt to "bleach" the Indian out of the American landscape. By focusing on the vivid colors of the woods, the medicines, and the spirits, the characters refuse to be turned into "gray" citizens. Their spirituality is a technicolor shield that protects them from the dulling effect of assimilation.

Elders in each generation teach the next generation their values, traditions, and beliefs through their own tribal languages, social practices, arts, music, ceremonies, and customs. Kinship and extended family relationships have always been and continue to be essential in the shaping of American Indian cultures. In the novel we can see Thomas asking advises to his father to fight against the termination of the US recognition of the sovereignty of American Indian Tribes.

"Ghettoization" happens when a culture is stripped of its internal logic and forced to exist only in the shadows of the dominant culture. Spirituality prevents this by maintaining a vast internal landscape for the characters.

While the reservation is physically small and impoverished (a "ghetto" in economic terms), the characters' spiritual world is limitless. Gerald, the medicine man, "flies" spiritually to find Vera, showing that their reach extends far beyond the fences of the reservation or the slums of Minneapolis. Ghettoization often involves a "break" with history. By interacting with ghosts like Roderick, characters like Thomas maintain a "long view" of time. They aren't just 1950s poor laborers; they are part of a lineage that predates the United States and will outlast its policies. This sense of being "anchored" prevents them from feeling like temporary, displaced people.

Erdrich uses Magical Realism as a tool of resistance. By depicting spirits as ordinary parts of the community, she asserts that Indigenous life cannot be fully "governed" because parts of it are invisible to the state. When the community performs ceremonies, they are engaging in a legal and spiritual act that the Termination Bill cannot touch. It creates a "sovereign space" that exists outside the reach of federal law. Spirituality acts as the "connective tissue" that holds the tribe together. Without it, they would be individual poor citizens in a 1950s ghetto; with it, they are a sovereign nation engaged in an ancient and ongoing struggle for existence.

The resolution of the plot—the temporary defeat of the Termination Bill—is only possible because the characters refused to be culturally ghettoized. If they had viewed themselves as "poor Indians" without a country, they would have lacked the spiritual Armor to stand up to the U.S. Senate. The climax proves that their shamanism and stewardship are not just for the woods; they are tools for the modern world.

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