#3.1
2012
ISSN 2161-0010

Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature

Brooks, Stuart. "Trickster V. Colonialism: Old Ways and New Ways in *The Plague of Doves.*" *Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature* 3.1 (Fall 2013): 89-97. PDF.

Stuart Brooks

Trickster V. Colonialism: Old Ways and New Ways in *The Plague of Doves*

> And it came to pass at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made: And he sent forth a raven, which went forth to and fro, until the waters were dried up from off the earth.
>
> Also he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground; But the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned unto him into the ark, for the waters were on the face of the whole earth: then he put forth his hand, and took her, and pulled her in unto him into the ark. (Genesis 8.6-9)
>
> "On the wings of a snow white dove,
>
> He sends his pure, sweet love" (Ferguson)

In the early 90's I became infatuated with the men's movement, as epitomized by Robert Bly's *Iron John*. I became very interested in trying to apply classic myths to my life. I even bought a self-help book titled *The Path of the Everyday Hero* by Lorna Catford and Michael Ray, which posits that all archetypal myths are stories of transformation consisting of six phases: innocence, call to adventure, initiation, allies, breakthrough, and celebration (38-42). So, college can be seen as a heroic journey, but this doesn't help very much after graduation. Or, what do I do now that my quest is over? Catford and Ray suggest that we begin a new quest, but what do we do when the inevitable happens, and we run out of quests?

A little later, I found another answer to this question. In the second grade my son studied a book about Anansi the spider. Anansi is an African trickster who gets into lots of trouble. My son's class even saw a play about Anansi at the Galveston Grand Opera House. This piqued my interest in tricksters, and eventually led me to Lewis Hyde and *Trickster Makes This World.* Hyde discusses the trickster gods, like Coyote of Native North Americans, and Loki of Scandinavia. According to Hyde, these gods are very important for people in their middle years, like me. People who understand that old age and treachery wins out over youth and innocence

every time. The book suggests that myths of the trickster gods can be seen as guideposts in the journey through the middle portion of life. I worked in boring, just-a-jobs for 20 years, supporting my family, until the untimely death of my father allowed me to assess my own dreams. My personal connection with the trickster inspired me to take the inheritance from my father, a college professor, and go to graduate school. I initially sought further education for practical reasons, to get a better job, but eventually turned in a direction that honored my family, the tradition of storytelling.

The trickster fairly jumps from the pages of Louise Erdrich's *The Plague of Doves* in several of the characters, but I see the footprints of the trickster most clearly in the character of Mooshun, also known as Seraph Milk. Unlike most trickster characters, Mooshun also strikes me as being a broken person, who has been traumatized by a central event in his life and is not able to move past it. The central event I am referring to here gets at the heart of colonialism. Rather than sticking to this story – in true trickster fashion – Erdrich interjects an alternative story that subverts the entire theory of colonialism, the story of Marn Wolde. Marn enlists the help of the trickster to end her unhappy marriage. Erdrich eventually resolves the story of Mooshun's past, not in a way that ties a happy ending up in a pretty little bow, but in a way that is much more human, and leaves Mooshun still tilting at his self-appointed foe. Similarly, Erdrich approaches colonialism metaphorically, rather than objectively. Her seemingly ironic title, *The Plague of Doves*, hints at some core colonial issues, that there is such a thing as too much of a good thing, that an over abundance of doves (white people and their gods) can really mess up the natural way of things, and that adopting the white man's ways can lead to trouble.

Erdrich's approach is much different from the approach of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, a member of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, who began publishing in 1977 with *Then Badger Said This , and whose most recent book is Anti-Indianism in Modern America (2007), of which one reviewer states, "* Elizabeth Cook-Lynn argues that the American West should be fundamentally understood as stolen" (University of Illinois Press). Says Cook-Llynn:

> "Anger, … is what started me writing. Writing, for me, then, is an act of defiance born of the need to survive. I am me. I exist. I am Dakotah. I write. It is the quintessential act of optimism born of frustration. It is an act of courage, I think. And, in the end, as Simon Ortiz says, it is an act that defies oppression" (Bruchac 57-8.).

Cook-Lynn has written extensively and is beginning to be studied as part of an emerging field of scholarship focusing on the colonialization of Native Americans (Afagla, 2010; Burford, 2007; Bailey, 2012; Luetzow, 2010; George, 2010), but Erdrich is not writing scholarship. Rather than telling us about anger, confusion, and well-meaning oppression, Erdrich shows us how these things damage, enlighten, and ultimately don't matter in the lives of her characters, how the power of story and myth are greater than the white man's ways, and how they provide a road map, or a compass, for an often mystifying world.

To begin with then, let me talk a bit about tricksters, their appearance in Erdrich's previous work, some characteristics of tricksters, and some examples of Mooshun's trickster ways. "From the first publication of *Love Medicine,* in 1984, tricksters have played a central and pervasive role in

Louise Erdrich's fiction." (J. Smith 71). Erdrich identifies herself as Ojibwa, which is sometimes translated in the United States into Chippewa ("Native Americans").

In *The Plague of Doves*, Erdrich continues to explore the role of the trickster. The meat of the novel begins with a narrative of the way in which Mooshun met his wife. The narrative is presented in the third person by Mooshun's granddaughter, Evelina Harp. The use of the third person here lends credence to the story, establishing the "truth" of the manner in which Mooshun's ear was damaged, which will become important a bit later. The countryside is infested by a plague of doves (Evelina thinks this is plausible because of the great migratory flocks of passenger pigeons that roamed the plains at the turn of the century) and Mooshun is called by his brother, a Catholic priest, to help bless the fields and drive off the plague. Mooshun drops his guard by lowering the candelabra his brother had given him to protect his face, and is immediately struck in the face by a flying dove and knocked unconscious. "Instantly, he was struck on the forehead by a bird hurled with such force that it seemed to have been flung by God's hand…" (8). While he is unconscious, the doves peck at his ear, leaving a permanent scar, the first explanation for the misshapenness of his ear. He is awakened by a vision in a long white communion dress named Junesse. The two fall madly in love and run away to live in the wilderness, almost like the First Man and First Woman. However, in this story, the young lovers are saved by a powerful white woman named Maude Black, who feeds and clothes the couple until they are ready to return to real world. Here again, Evelina gives credence to the story by saying that there is historical evidence of a woman named Maude Black, that she did run a ranch in North Dakota around that time, and was known to take in strangers. So the first interaction between whites and Indians in the book is one in which a white woman comes to the rescue of a young Indian couple. In presenting this as the story of the creation of Evelina's family, Erdrich puts a unique spin on typical creation stories. Here, First Man and First Woman are "saved" by the intervention of an outsider.

At this point it seems important to determine what some of the characteristics of Nanabohzo are, to see if Mooshun can be compared to him. In addition to Nunabush and Nanabohzo, the Chippewa trickster god is also referred to as Winabijou (Dorson478). In *The Plague of Doves*, family members refer to him as Mooshun, while outsiders, like Father Cassidy, refer to him as Seraph Milk. So, Mooshun and Nanabohzo share the characteristic of having more than one name. A seraph is a celestial being having three pairs of wings ("Seraph"). Seraph Milk is named after winged angels, which is a bit ironic since one of the first things that happens to him is that he is struck in the face by a bird hurled by God's hand.

This propensity for humor is one of the characteristics of the trickster. In "Winabijou (Nanabush) Brings on the Flood," Richard Dorson states that "Winabijou is a regular rascal, always hungry, scheming, greedy, and an old 'letch' to boot, not above seducing his own daughter. "The Indians know his character, relish his predicaments and applaud his come-uppances" (Dorson 479). An example of Mooshun's scheming, lecherous, character is his relations with Neve Harp, a white woman. Neve is the sister of Seraph's son-in-law, which would seem to make her off limits. The relationship may even be incestuous. His daughter and son-in-law do everything they can to separate Mooshun from Neve, including telling Mooshun that Neve can fart the National Anthem (35). Mooshun is unswayed. The Harp's refuse Mooshun's request to send love letters to Neve

by not letting him have any stamps. This plan backfires when Mooshun steals stamps from his son-in-law's collection. The stamps Mooshun uses to validate his missives of love are worthless to the US Postal Service, but worth hundreds of thousands of dollars to philatelists. Finally, the Harps (the instrument of angels) relent and give Mooshun his night of passion with Neve after Evelina retrieves the priceless stamps. The night leaves both Mooshun and Neve more than a bit confused.

Erdrich tells this story to confirm that Mooshun is a randy old rascal, not above stealing to get what he wants, and certainly not above wanting something, or someone, totally inappropriate for him to have. Erdrich also explodes the notion of worth. It is unlikely that Neve Harp has ever seen Mooshun as anything other than a doddering old Indian, not someone worth considering as husband material, even though Neve has had four. In stealing the stamps Mooshun shows that their worth is ephemeral; the post office does not acknowledge them as legal postage and either returns the letters to the sender, or requests additional postage from the receiver. In both cases, the joke is on the white woman, Neve Harp, for not knowing what she could have had in Mooshun, and for letting a half million dollar stamp slip through her fingers. As is usual in trickster stories, Mooshun emerges none the worse for wear. The Harps are just happy to have the stamp back and don't chastise Mooshun when he sneaks home with his tail between his legs after his night with Neve.

Mooshun is a great storyteller, as is evidenced by the story he tells to Father Cassidy of Liver Eating Johnson to explain what happened to Mooshun's ear, a question he never answered the same way twice. "The ear had not actually, he'd tell us later, been pecked away by doves" (37). Father Cassidy intermittently comes over to the Harp residence to attempt to convert Mooshun to Christianity.

Liver Eating Johnson is a terrible white man who hates Indians and was said to cut the liver from his living victims and devour that organ right before their eyes. Mooshun tells of a fight he had with Johnson, in which being chased by Johnson, "I take off like a rabbit, quick. I've got speed, but Liver Eater's got endurance" (38). Incidentally, the animal form of Nanabohzo is a rabbit ("Nanabohzo"). Mooshun doubles back on Liver Eater and fights him, eating off various pieces of the white man. He keeps up with this strategy until nothing is left of Liver Eater but one of his fingers, which Mooshun keeps as a souvenir. In the process, Liver Eater is able to get in a few bites of own, including the one in which he bites off a piece of Mooshun's ear, thus explaining how the ear came to be damaged, the supposed point of the story.

This story is actually an allegory for the Indian wars. Liver Eater Johnson represents the U.S. Army, big, smelly white men who attacked the Indians and ate their land. Mooshun represents the Indians. The white men were fierce and had endurance; the Indians were fast and clever. In Mooshun's tale, he wins the battle with Liver Eating Johnson, and the Indians did win many battles, even if the U.S. Army eventually won the war. Also, Mooshun wins this battle with Father Cassidy, who fails to convert any Indians on this visit, and is laid low by a salamander, a creature the Priest regards as an emissary of Satan.

I said earlier that the central story of Mooshun's life is a story of personal colonialism. Before

re-telling the story, it might be helpful to discuss a bit about the meaning of colonialism. In order to do this, let me begin with a quote from Jean Curran and Susan Takata regarding Edward Said's thoughts about colonialism:

> Said's message is that imperialism is not about a moment in history; it is about a continuing interdependent discourse between subject peoples and the dominant discourse of the empire. Despite the apparent and much-vaunted end of colonialism, the unstated assumptions on which empire was based linger on, snuffing out visions of an "Other" world without domination, constraining the imaginary of equality and justice. Said sees bringing these unstated assumptions to awareness as a first step in transforming the old tentacles of empire. To this end he wrote *Culture AND Imperialism* (Curran and Takata).

Building on what Said says about the interdependence between subject peoples and the dominant discourse of empire, in "Colonize This!," Christina Tzintzun speaks of a personal type of colonization. She argues that as a white man marrying a Mexican woman, her father subjugated her mother into a lifetime of low self esteem and submissiveness. Tzintzun's mother was forced by her economic circumstances to accept the superiority of her white husband and do his bidding. Tzintzun argues that by subjugating her mother, and other women of color, her father perpetuates colonial tropes that should have gone away along with the end of the frontier.

Mooshun tells a similar story of personal colonization. In his story, a white family is killed, and a group of Indians, including Mooshun, happen upon the bodies. The three Indians with Mooshun were Cuthbert Peace and two Catholic Indians, Asiginak and Holy Track, who had crosses nailed to the soles of his boots. The infant daughter has been left alive, which creates a quandary for the Indians. They decide to feed the baby and alert the authorities, but also to flee the scene. They flee because they are worried that the white men in the area will punish the Indians for the crime, even though they had nothing to do with it.

In *Conquest,* Andrea Smith lists ten incidences of state sponsored violence perpetrated between 1997 and 2003 in Great Plains area in which *The Plague of Doves* is set (145-149). If such things occurred in 2003, it is likely that things were not much different in the early 20th century, so the fears of the Indians are well-founded. In Mooshun's story, the Indians try to hide, but are found out by the white men, who take them to a tree and hang them to death.

This is the central story of Mooshun's life. He was hanged with his friends for a crime he didn't commit. His jousting with Father Cassidy can be seen as Mooshun's feeble attempts to retaliate against the white men against whom he was powerless to save his friends.

I would like to leave Mooshun hanging here, as Erdrich does in the novel, and move on to the story of another character that employs the trickster while turning the notion of colonialism on its head. The story I am referring to is the story of Marn Wolde. Marn is a white woman who falls madly in love with an Indian man named Billy Peace. Marn has spiritual leanings and is drawn to Billy's ministry. In the course of her life with Billy she is also drawn to snake handling and begins to keep a copperhead and a rattlesnake as pets. Remembering that "seraph" is derived from a Hebrew word meaning fiery serpent we see Marn – after being married to Billy for

several years – comes to see his ministry as a cult from which she must free herself and her children. In order to do this, she enlists the help of the snakes, "milking" them of their poison. If we equate Seraph Milk with the trickster, it seems as if he has transformed into serpents who counsel Marn to kill her husband, and also provide the means for the murder. It is a major juxtaposition of traditional colonialism to see an Indian man subjugating a white woman who then kills him using trickery inspired by serpents, in a way that intertwines the imagery of Adam and Eve and the deception of Winabijou.

If *The Plague of Doves* were a traditional colonial novel, the hanging story would appear at the beginning, as it does here, and the rest of the novel would focus around it. In this novel, the hanging story is mentioned, and then the author goes on to other things. She tells the story of the founding of the town, then a strange story in which a banker has his own wife kidnapped, before telling the story of Marn Wolde and Billy Peace, who are decidedly not a colonial couple. In veering so far from the traditional tale of colonial subjugation, Erdrich is saying that life doesn't necessarily follow a generic script, that sometimes people do surprising things, and that occasionally the young can help to heal the old, which leads us back to Mooshun.

" ' And you," I said, "how did you live? Can you live after being hung? ' " (Erdrich82) This is the question Evelina asks Mooshun after hearing the hanging story. She doesn't get a good answer from him so she asks her mother, Mooshun's daughter, who says that her mother, Junesse, was the daughter of Eugene Wilstrand, a member of the hanging party, and Mooshun was not hanged to death as a favor to Junesse. This is a perfectly plausible answer, but not particularly satisfying. Evelina decides to dig further. She questions her former teacher, who is also some sort of cousin, Sister Mary Anita Wilstrand, about the hanging. In response Sister Mary Anita produces Holy Track's boots, which she gives to Evelina, who takes them to show Mooshun. In what should be a dramatic scene, Evelina presents the boots to Mooshun, who "shrugged and put his hands to his eyes" (253). Evelina realizes that Mooshun is the one who told the hanging party where to find the Indians, and that that was the real reason they let him live. Mooshun's response is to have Evelina take him to the hanging tree and throw the boots into the branches. " 'That is sentiment instead of justice," I said to Mooshun" [….] " 'Awee, my girl, The doves are still up there.' " [….] "I didn't have anything to say about the doves, but I hated the gentle swaying of those boots' " (253-254).

I was looking for this to be the happy ending to the novel, in which the grand tragedy of Mooshun's life is resolved, and he finds closure. Instead, Evelina states that what they are doing is just making a gesture that doesn't resolve anything. Mooshun agrees by saying that the doves are still up there. The convoluted issues between the whites and the Indians have not been resolved.

One more Mooshun and Father Cassidy story: It's Halloween and Moosun is passing out candy. He is very frustrated because the kids are not nearly scared enough. He starts taking out his teeth and leaving them in the candy bowl, so that the kids have to reach around them to get to the goodies. This is fun for a while, but begins to get dull. Mooshun then goes into the kitchen, strips to his undershorts and wraps his body in the dough for tomorrow's bread. He covers himself with ketchup and sneeks up behind the last group of trick-or-treaters, shrieks a barely

human, shocking squeal, and totters towards the kids, who take off like jackrabbits. The last one picks up a rock and wings it, hitting Mooshun squarely in the forehead, landing him in the hospital.

> "I'm going to die now," he sighed.
>
> "No you're not, Daddy."
>
> "Yes, I am. I want my lovergirl to visit me. Here in the hospital. Call Neve! It's my final request!"
>
> […] just then Father Cassidy bounded lightly between the curtains. He had a spark in his eye and the good book in his hands.
>
> "Am I still in time?" he asked loudly. "One of the nurses sent word."
>
> Mooshun frowned and opened his eyes.
>
> "There is time! How fortunate!" Father Cassidy muttered a fervent prayer. He had the Holy Oils along in a little kit. He began to fussily arrange them on a stainless steel bedside table. Mooshun gave a groan of irritation and stood up.
>
> "If you won't let me die in peace, then I'll live, though I do not want to. You won't get me this time, Father Hop Along."
>
> […]A year later [Father Cassidy] quit the priesthood, went home, grew a beard and became an entrepreneur…His distinctive skipping around, his calflike and happy energy, became a trademark for the beef industry and made him very rich. (260-261).

Unlike so many of the other characters in the book, Mooshun does not die, because he chooses not to. In this way, he again epitomizes the trickster, by doing something other than the expected. The same could be said for *The Plague of Doves.* In several instances, the novel seems to be setting itself up as a novel of a particular genre, only to veer off into an unexpected direction. It's not a detective story: although a great crime is committed, the mystery becomes secondary to other events as they unfold, and the solution to the crime is given at the end of the book as an afterthought at a point at which it is possible that the reader has stopped caring whodunit. The tale of Evelina and Corwin could be a great love story, but it isn't. At the end of the book it's unclear whether they will be together next year, or even next week. In fact, the book ends with "I take my cane to feel the way, for the air is so black I think already we are invisible" (311). As if, at the end, none of what transpired in the little town of Pluto, North Dakota really mattered to anyone.

So as a reader, I am left with the question of "Why should I have read this book?" The answer I come up with is that life doesn't have to be a hero's journey, a series of story arcs of initiation, breakthroughs and celebrations. Life is many things to many different people, all of whom deserve to have their stories told. Perhaps the magic of a story is not in the meaning, but in the

telling.

What then of colonialism? If Father Cassidy, who is trying to colonize the Indians by converting them to Christianity, can be seen as the arm of colonization, isn't it instructive that he ultimately quits the priesthood and becomes an entrepreneur? What Erdrich is saying to me is that the label of colonialism is itself a trap, that it is not something that has come and gone, and that it is not something that defines us as a culture. Colonialism is a part of our heritage, something that happened in the past, and will continue to happen as long as people are separated into subjugated and subjugators. The best way to de-colonize ourselves is to realize that we are all a big mixture of many things. As Christina Tzintzun says, "I am mixed. I am the colonized and the colonizer, the exploited and the exploiter. I am confused, yet sure. I am a contradiction" (28). Following the example of Father Cassidy, the best way to deal with colonization is to move beyond it to something else entirely.

Works Cited

Afagla, Kodjo. *Reading Cook-Lynn: Anti-colonialism, Cultural Resistance, and Native Empowerment*. N.p.: n.p., 2010. Print.

Bailey, J. *Voicing Oppositional Conformity: Sarah Winnemucca and the Politics of Rape, Colonialism, and "Citizenship": 1870--1890.* Portland State University. *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses,* 2012: 149.

Bly, Robert. *Iron John*. Cambridge: Da Capo, 1990. Print.

Bruchac, Joseph. "As a Dakotah Woman: an Interview with Elizabeth Cook-Lynn." *Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets*. Ed. Joseph Bruchac. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1987. 57-71. Print.

Catford, Lorna, and Michael Ray. *The Path of the Everyday Hero*. New York: St. Martin's, 1991. Print.

Burford, A. *Between women: Alliances and Divisions in American Indian , Mexican American, and Anglo American Literatures of Protest to Colonialism.* The University of Arizona. *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, 2007: 306.

Cook-Lynn, Elizabeth. *Anti-Indianism in Modern America: A Voice from Tatekeya's Earth*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 2001. Print.

Curran, Jeanne and Susan Takata. "Edward W. Said's Culture and Imperialism." *California State University, Dominguez Hills*. Web. 04 July 2010.

Dorson, Richard. "Winabijou (Nanabush) Brings on the Flood." *Folktales Told Around the World*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1975. 478-83. Print.

"Elizabeth Cook-Lynn." *: Voices From the Gaps : University of Minnesota*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Nov. 2012. <http://voices.cla.umn.edu/artistpages/cookLynn.php>.

Erdrich, Louise. *Love Medicine*. New York: Harper Collins, 1984. Print.

Erdrich, Louise. *The Plague of Doves*. New York: Harper Collins, 2008. Print.

George, A. *The Ochapowace Reserve: The Impact of Colonialism.* The University of Regina. *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, 2009: 176.

Hyde, Lewis. *Trickster Makes This World*. New York: North Point, 1999. Print.

Luetzow, N. T. *Colonialism, Conflict, and the Religious Response.* South Dakota State University. *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, 2010: 72.

" Nanabozho: The Deity from Native American Mythology." *Godchecker.com - Your Guide To The Gods. Mythology with a Twist!* Web. 28 June 2010.

"Native Americans: Chippewa Indian Tribe (Ojibway First Nations, Ojibwa, Anishinabe)." *Native American Language Net: Preserving and Promoting Indigenous American Indian Languages*. Web. 05 July 2010.

Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1994. Print.

"Seraph." The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 27 Jun. 2010.

Smith, Andrea. "Anticolonial Responses to Gender Violence." *Conquest*. Cambridge: South End, 2005. 137-175. Print.

Smith, Jeanne Rosier. *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Fiction* Berkely: U California P, 1997. *Google Books*. Web. 27 June 2010.

Tzintzun, Christina. "Colonize This!" *Colonize This!* Ed. Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehman. Emeryville CA: Seal, 2002. 17-28. Print.University of Illinois Press. “Book Summary of *Anti-Indianism in Modern America.*” U Illinois P, 2012. Web. 27 Nov. 2012. <http://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/catalog/87smp8we9780252074271.html>.

"Wings Of A Dove - Written by Bob Ferguson." *Wings Of A Dove - Written by Bob Ferguson*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Nov. 2012. <http://www.touchjesussongs.net/reecesisterscdlyricspg1.html>.