

native traditions of telling and knowing history. Here the words of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Linda Hutcheon, Hayden White, and other Western scholars define the limits and the possibilities of history. Even Erdrich's "revisionary project" is known by its participation in and renegotiation of Western history (991). Does the Native American writer bring nothing unique to the conception or discussion of history? It is not enough to include native-white encounters in the revision of American history and culture or to question the monolith (the truth) of History. And it is not enough to find resistance and revision within narratives of colonial encounters. If we are truly to decolonize the representation of indigenous peoples and not simply locate them in positions of reaction to Western history, then we must allow ourselves to discover their actual and original contributions to the telling of history.

Peterson's article assumes that Erdrich's need to "find a new way of making history" must take place in the post-modern debate on culture and history (984). The oral tradition is assumed to be the counterhistory of the written narrative and Anishinabe history and culture a defense against the violence of colonial history. The presence and absence of Anishinabe traditions throughout *Tracks* encourages the reader to look for Anishinabe history in the nonoppositional and seemingly indecipherable moments of the text. Certainly, this is Fleur's power and frustration: her historical being is elemental, originating with the earth and inexplicable within any system of knowledge available to the reader.

In this novel, Erdrich does provide the reader with the easy oppositions of native-white encounters. Nanapush and Pauline, the novel's dual narrators, represent the story (native) and anti-story (white) in the struggle for the ownership of tribal history. Even when Nanapush uses "I," he never steps out of communal identification; Pauline, on the other hand, moves progressively into an alienation—from land, mind, body, culture—defined solely by postcontact, post-Christian narratives. In discussing the two narrators, Peterson finds historical revision in Nanapush's stories but evades the madness of Pauline's narration. This evasion allows her to read, with the assistance of Paula Gunn Allen, "gender balance rather than gender oppression" in the competing stories of Nanapush and Pauline (989). Even Pauline's insanity and violence—her visions appear, talk, and walk across stoves, and God himself tells her she is really white—are insufficient to discourage the discovery of balance in works by Native Americans.

I agree with Peterson's attempt to defend Erdrich's *Tracks* against Silko's criticism of *The Beet Queen*. *Tracks* is a devastating critique of conquest and Chris-

tianity, unrelenting in its representation of the violence visited on Native America. However, in her ambition to place Erdrich within a larger intellectual project, Peterson overlooks many opportunities within the novel for a confrontation with History. To read Pauline as Nanapush's complement, she must read violence as assimilation and madness as the conflict of truths; in short, Pauline must become passive, simply a replicate of colonial ideology rather than a horrifying example of self-hate and internal colonization. And in restricting a reading of *Tracks* to the narrations of Nanapush and Pauline, Peterson becomes committed to an oppositional and reactive native history. She argues within History but neglects its object. Nanapush and Pauline have no history to tell without Fleur. As the object of their desire to know the story, Fleur frustrates, and demands more than, historical or cultural truths. She is as easy to possess and know, to categorize or interpret, as the Pillager smile.

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To the Editor:

I admired Nancy J. Peterson's "History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*." Peterson treats the relation between history and fiction adeptly, but I don't follow her treatment of that between history and the past, particularly as she quotes Linda Hutcheon: "To say that the past is only *known* to us through textual traces is not . . . the same as saying that the past is only textual, as . . . some forms of poststructuralism seem . . . to assert. This ontological reduction is not the point of postmodernism. . . ." Peterson, I take it, thinks that Derrida invites an extreme view with his statement "there is nothing beyond the text" and that Hutcheon rightly cautions us against it (983). As Peterson says, "To participate in the 'ontological reduction' that Hutcheon speaks of is to question or even to deny that the Holocaust occurred—or the massacre at Wounded Knee or slavery or the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and so on. [It is also] to inflict further violence on the victims and survivors." And exculpate the guilty, I might add.

Hutcheon, and I think Derrida too, reiterate Augustine: "When we describe the past, it is not the reality of it we are drawing out of our memories, *but only words based on impressions of moments that no longer exist*. . . . [For example,] my own childhood no longer exists, but when I recall those days and describe them, I imagine them in the present because their impressions remain in my memory" (*Confessions* 11.18; my trans.; my emphasis).

Hutcheon's Augustinian view of the past is right, but I doubt that Derrida goes further. Why is it extreme to say that there is nothing beyond the text when we realize that the past doesn't exist? That it did exist is self-evident, but we still have no access to it.

Aristotle, too, finds the past off-limits: "Of everything resolvable into parts, all or some of them must exist as it exists. Yet concerning time, though it appears resolvable into parts, some parts have been and do not exist, others are yet to be and do not exist, and neither [past nor future] exists now. Therefore, the present cannot be a part of time; for a part measures the whole, and the whole must be composed of those parts, but time [past or future] cannot be of the present" (*Physics* 4.218a.2–7; my trans.). Difficult, but here's what I make of it. Aristotle sees the relation of the present to time as the relation of a point to a distance (a line). A point is infinitely small, a location without dimension. An infinite number of points amounts to no distance, so a point measures nothing. By analogy, just as we can't infer a distance from a point, we can't infer past or future from the present—it's incommensurate with both.

Augustine goes further—though Aristotle says nothing here to contradict him—by assuming that we experience the present. The past *was* experienced and *was* known. Daring epistemology: empirical knowledge of the past existed in the past; such knowledge was real, but it too no longer exists.

Aristotle is more conservative; he doesn't assert that the present can be experienced or known, but if he had, I think he would have described it as noumenal, like a point: an interval without dimension. That wouldn't mean that the present and our experiences of it are unreal, only that their intervals of existence are infinitely brief. But perception occurs over a measurable interval: we can measure the brain's responses to phenomena and, with the right equipment, even watch Augustine's "impressions" being generated. Still, we can't perceive the present; perception takes time, and the present is infinitely brief. If we can know the present, we must know it as we know, say, a triangle—without perceiving it.

Augustine is more confident; he's imagining the mind as an infinitely fast camera that captures an infinitely brief experience, the present. The exposed negatives are his impressions, the objects to which we have perceptual recourse. He also assumes that any text we might create from those impressions will initiate other impressions for a reader. He doesn't say so explicitly, but we can follow his original line: a reader may experience a text in the present but will capture only impressions of it. Even here, Aristotle probably wouldn't contradict Augustine, having likely inherited a belief that text is inherently un-

reliable: "Socrates: 'Anyone who leaves behind a manuscript, and anyone who takes it over, with a belief that writing can provide something permanent and reliable must be extraordinarily simple-minded; indeed, . . . utterly ignorant. . .'" (Plato, *Phaedrus* 275c–d; my trans.).

To sum up the ancients: the author has been dead a good long time; the past, though it was real, doesn't exist; and empirical knowledge of the past, though it too was real, also doesn't exist.

History is not knowledge of the past. It's text, based on perceived impressions generated by noumenal, past experiences.

Suppose we revise Derrida to bring him up to date with Augustine: "there was something beyond the text but only an impression of it existed when the text was written." A bit prosaic, I'm afraid, but Derrida loves to sound portentous and original, often to a fault. Even so, I can't imagine him or even his supporters concluding that the past never existed. But that's Peterson's concern, and I'd be grateful if she would elaborate. I don't see how the statement "there is nothing beyond the text" might ever imply that the Holocaust—or the rape of Nanking or the Hutu massacre—didn't happen.

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### Reply:

Betty Louise Bell's response to my essay is grounded in an opposition between (Western) postmodernism and Chippewa history and culture. Instead of viewing these ways of knowing as oppositions, though, I tried to show, particularly in the second half of the essay, how they complement each other: Nanapush's tactics as trickster can be seen as both traditionally Anishinabe and contemporaneously postmodern. In my view of Nanapush, I have been influenced by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s work on the African American trickster the Signifying Monkey and by Gerald Vizenor's work on the Chippewa trickster. In Gates's and Vizenor's analyses, tricksters are characterized as being both traditional and postmodern. Thus, I would not consider my essay so interested in defending postmodernism that it neglects native traditions, as Bell insists.

Bell is also concerned about my view of the two narrators of the novel—Nanapush and Pauline—as complementary rather than oppositional. I have yet to find an opposition in Erdrich's novels and short stories that remains stable. In *Love Medicine*, for example, Lulu and Marie ought to be fiercely antagonistic as they battle for