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“Prey to Unknown Dreams”: Louise Erdrich, *The Plague of Doves*, and the Exceptionalist Disavowal of History

But what is the difference between the influence of instinct upon a wolf and history upon a man? In both cases, justice is prey to unknown dreams.

Louise Erdrich, *The Plague of Doves*

No population has been more significantly harmed by American exceptionalism than the indigenous tribes their colonizers called Indians. To put this under-explored history at its simplest, as many as twelve million indigenous people, living in seven hundred cultural units on the North American continent, were subjected to various forms of “systematic extermination” by European colonizers (Baker 317-18). The cultures and histories of these “Vanishing Americans” were largely erased, leading John Carlos Rowe to call Native Americans “the repressed contents of an imperial cultural consciousness” (197). Indeed, the relationship between American exceptionalism and the repression of its victims’ histories is central to Donald E. Pease’s analysis. Interpreting the exceptionalist myth of America as a “fantasy” which attains its efficacy by “supplying its adherents with the psychosocial structures that permitted them to ignore the state’s exceptions,” Pease argues that “structures of disavowal” enabled the state’s exceptions “insofar as they sustained the attitude through which U.S. citizens willfully misrepresented their history as well as their place in the world” (12). Massively subscribed fantasy has enabled citizens to “experience what was exceptional about their U.S. national identity as the disavowal of U.S. imperialism at home and abroad” and then, in a self-confirming strategy, to believe they had achieved the fantasized ideal nation: “After it defined America as the fulfillment of the world’s dream of an ideal nation, the fantasy of American exceptionalism eradicated the difference between the national ideal U.S. citizens wanted and the faulty nation they had” (21-22). In relation to the indigenous peoples whose land they expropriated, these “structures of disavowal” enabled Americans to transmogrify a history of genocide into the benign practice of “Manifest Destiny” required for the continent-wide spread of American justice. Disavowal similarly permitted European colonizers to regard the continent they arrived on
as *terra nullius* or empty land, to think of Indians as a single homogeneous group of savages, and to justify their own barbarous extermination of Native peoples.¹

Native studies scholarship and creative work can be understood, in part, as a sustained critique of such disavowals of Native identities and histories and a necessarily political reclamation of tribal rights in America. Louis Owens, for example, argues that the word “Indian” was designed to disavow Native standing and indigeneity: “Native cultures – their voices systematically silenced – had no part in the ongoing discourse that evolved over several centuries to define the utterance ‘Indian’ within the language of the invaders” (7). Jace Weaver links the disavowal of Native indigeneity, coupled with the erasure of Native cultures, to a constructed fiction of the colonizers’ own original inhabitancy: “The declaration of indigenous cultures as vanishing or extinct becomes a means in settler colonies of establishing an uneasy illusion of indigeneity (indigenousness) on the part of the colonizers” (228). Gerald Vizenor comments that an elision of Native presence was common in American writing before Jefferson: “the *indian* was an absence in histories. That absence has become a theme of romantic tragedy. Many Natives have turned that absence into a fugitive pose” (11). These examples could be amplified at length; recognition of and resistance against a sustained history of disavowal continues to engage Native scholars and writers.

My purpose here is to show that Louise Erdrich, a writer of Chippewa/Ojibwa and German American parentage, recovers in *The Plague of Doves* (2008) Native histories that were systematically disavowed by American exceptionalism and uses postmodern narrative strategies for political ends. Praised in 1999 as “one of the most important Native American writers of the past fifteen years and one of the most accomplished and promising novelists of any heritage now working in the United States” (Beidler and Barton 1), Erdrich was also famously criticized by Leslie Marmon Silko, in a 1986 review of *The Beet Queen*, for pursuing aesthetics at the cost of politics. Silko complained that Erdrich’s prose reflected “academic, post-modern, so-called experimental influences … no history or politics intrudes to muddy the well of pure necessity” (179).² Erdrich’s postmodernism can be traced to her studies at Johns Hopkins with metafictionist John Barth, whom she calls “a genius, a superb teacher” (Halliday; see also Scott); but in Vizenor’s view, postmodern narrative strategies have a longstanding place in Native storytelling.

¹ Godfrey Hodgson ironically observes that “Native Americans did not think of America as empty” (163). But their numbers were quickly and dramatically reduced by plagues of smallpox, measles, and other diseases, as well as war and murder. David Stannard reports that Europeans routinely slaughtered women and children, following a practice that was “flatly and intentionally genocidal” (119). The seizure of Native lands escalated as Americans moved west; Howard Zinn writes, “Indian Removal, as it has been politely called, cleared the land for white occupancy” (125). What David Baker calls “openly racist *official* policies of genocide” (319) emerged when political leaders and figures like L. Frank Baum, author of *The Wizard of Oz*, disavowed the humanity of Indians and issued public calls for their extermination (Stannard 126).

² For an extended analysis of Silko’s criticism of Erdrich, see Stirrup (78-85).
The separation of aesthetics and politics does not hold in Erdrich’s fourteen novels, which enlist a postmodern aesthetics in the service of a complex politics designed to resist and reverse the disavowal of Native culture. As Rowe puts it, when her texts refuse “to fit correctly the form of the novel,” Erdrich “forces her readers thereby to encounter a political history that otherwise remains largely unconscious, unseen, unthought, and unfelt” (203). In fact, Erdrich believes that contemporary American Indian writers are called to recover Native histories and stories: “In the light of enormous loss, they must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of the catastrophe” (“Where” 48).

While *Plague* was recognized by reviewers as one of Erdrich’s best novels, and while it introduces the community and characters used in Erdrich’s National Book Award winner, *The Round House* (2012), it has not yet received much critical attention. I will argue that this important novel uncovers the long but unrecognized reach of American exceptionalist history into the present. Indeed, *Plague* is especially significant for its exploration of the ways an exceptionalist heritage creates historical erasures, leaving specters of disavowed events and motives to deform relationships among Americans of European, Native, and mixed descent. The novel recovers the historical lynching of three Native Americans, hanged without trial for the murder of several members of a white family. As I will argue in a first section of this essay, Erdrich draws on historical accounts of this little-known event, recasting her sources to emphasize the innocence, generosity, and courage of the Native men and the racist assurance of the Euro-American lynch mob that the Indians are both guilty and expendable. Erdrich moves the event, which occurred in 1897, forward to 1911 in order to place one young victim (who survives) as an elderly member of the community in a fictional North Dakota town called Pluto in the 1960s. Adding to the irony of the lynchings, she adds a backstory, also drawn from history: some years before the hangings, Native guides lead a group of Euro-Americans west, enabling them to claim the land that later becomes Pluto. The guides’ youngest brother will be one of the victims of the lynching, orchestrated by the very men whose colonization of western lands was enabled by the guides. Erdrich’s revisions of these two historical sources emphasize the violent racist logic informing the exceptionalist myth: when a white family is brutally murdered, “savage” Indians are assumed to be at fault, while savage white acts like lynching are held to

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3 *Plague* was shortlisted for the Pulitzer Prize and praised by reviewers. Kakutani calls it “arguably [Erdrich’s] most ambitious – and in many ways, her most deeply affecting – work yet”; Charles calls it a “wondrous novel”; Barcott “often gorgeous”; and Frase evidence that Erdrich “gets better and better.” Philip Roth writes in a cover blurb that the novel is “her dazzling masterpiece.” Three essays on the novel appear in Madsen (see also Stirrup 153-58). *The Round House* begins about fourteen years after the end of *Plague* in the household of Antone Bazil Coutts, his wife Geraldine Milk Coutts, and their thirteen-year-old son, Joe.

4 Erdrich moves the western expedition from 1857, the year identified in her historical source, to an unspecified later year, so the twenty-something Buckendorfs who claim land are younger than seventy-something at the time of the hangings.
constitute legitimate exceptions to the rule of law. Since the lynchers ask no questions before hanging the Indians, they can disavow the connections between their victims and the guides who saved their lives as well as their own linked assumptions about race and guilt. These events make visible a set of exceptionalist practices, as the “chosen people” make exceptions to their own laws while disavowing the injustice they apply in the name of justice.

In the relationships that emerge among the citizens of Pluto decades after the lynchings, Erdrich traces more ironies as the alternate face of the Euro-Americans’ racism expresses itself in exotic, Orientalized fantasies about the Natives. As I will show in the essay’s second section, Erdrich’s characters living half a century after the lynchings display complex aftereffects of the exceptionalist myth and the disavowals of history it has required: Euro-Americans envision Natives and mixed-race characters as closer to nature, including their own physical nature and sexuality, than people of European descent and thus figures of an attractive vitality and depth. Native Americans and biracial characters look on those of European descent as sophisticated, cultured, definitive of American norms; they are attracted by the “American face” of these Euro-Americans (239). Disavowing the long series of liaisons and affairs that have generated complex interrelations between them, each set of characters responds to an imagined exoticism and is drawn by an imagined “otherness”; these attractions form the powerful “unknown dreams” shaping their behavior. The unconscious dreams and desires represent the return of the repressed, uncovering what the myth of American exceptionalism required to be disavowed. They baffle and drive the central characters until, in parallel movements, each of them comes to understand the traumatic history specific to their town, its relation to the colonization of Native peoples, and the particular relevance of history to their own choices. These characters discover that their choices have been guided, like the wolf who responds to instincts he cannot rationalize or explain, by the “unknown dreams” that have been repressed and disavowed.

The novel itself recapitulates the characters’ mystification and gradual awakening, functioning as a mystery whose resolution depends on the recognition of the exceptionalist myth of American identity. An understanding of American exceptionalism and its required disavowals clarifies the novel itself and Erdrich’s choice of postmodern narrative strategies that led reviewers to call Plague “maddeningly opaque” (Barcott), “a vast, fractured narrative” (Charles), and “an elliptical, jigsaw puzzle of a narrative” (Kakutani). While the story of an exceptional America takes on the simplicity of a fairy tale, Erdrich’s narrative adopts instead a complex, discontinuous, plural form, as I will show in a third section. Erdrich camouflages the links between past and present, moving between decades in ways that conceal connections, withholding information as characters keep secrets from each other, and sketching only implicit relationships among the separate stories of the central characters. In this way also, Erdrich’s fiction illuminates American exceptionalism – its strategies for the erasure of Native peoples, its required burials of historical events, and its obfuscation of injustices committed
in the name of the nation. Reading both together places the disavowal of Native American history among the central aims and practices of American exceptionalism.

(Re)Visions of an Exceptionalist History

Erdrich has commented in an interview that the historical story of the lynching of three Native Americans “haunted me” for some time before she wrote Plague, but “I didn’t know how I was going to get to it” (Goodman). In another interview, she says that the “wrenching event” was appalling in part because one victim was only thirteen: “You know 13-year-olds—they’re children. How can you lynch a child?” (Baenen). Historical archives contain accounts of the historical events: the murders of the Thomas Spicer family, the subsequent trials of the Indians, and the lynchings appear on the North Dakota “GenWeb” site (Fischer) and in an article on November 15, 1897 in the New York Times (“Mob Law”). These sources exonerate the lynch mob and justify their execution of the Indians. Both sources make bland assertions about the five Natives’ guilt in the slayings of four related white adults (Thomas Spicer and his wife Mary Ellen, her mother, their daughter Lillie Spicer Rowse) and Lillie’s twin baby sons. The account by William Fischer explains that the Indians went to the Spicer farm seeking alcohol and alleges that they mutilated two of the bodies, clubbed the elderly woman to death, and beat Lillie, who resisted, to death with a table leg before killing the twin babies. Two of the Indians—one named Paul Holy Track—confessed, a third was found guilty at trial, though a translator’s services were needed and later questioned, and a fourth trial resulted in a hung jury (Fischer). When the State Supreme Court ruled that the confessions of two were not adequate to convict all five men in the absence of other evidence, a group of “about 40 masked men appeared,” overpowered the jailor, and hanged the three Indians who were in the county jail (Fischer). Appearing two days after the lynching, the Times article carried a subheading, “The Courts Were Too Slow,” and praised the lynch mob: “The lynching apparently had been planned carefully, and was carried out without a break in the programme. … The Lynchers were quiet but determined.” The first Indian to be executed was asked if the others were also guilty, and “He answered that they had been” (“Mob Law”). Participants in the lynching were not prosecuted.

When Erdrich comments on the murders and the lynchings, she does not invoke the term American exceptionalism, but her comments reflect an appalled awareness of the same underlying investment in Euro-American superiority. She tells an interviewer, “I think vengeance, rather than sitting back and allowing justice to be done over time, is really so much a part of our history. And unfortunately, it’s part of our present, as well” (Baenen). Both the anonymous reporter for the Times and Fischer, who in 1959 summed up historical sources reporting on the case in the Emmons County Record (North Dakota), imply that the lynching is a reasonable act committed by responsible
men in the name of justice: in both accounts, the Indians were guilty because they were looking for liquor and because two of them confessed – though it is clear that some of the Indians did not speak English and that the confessions were the prosecution’s only evidence. As Fischer points out, “it became apparent that all the defendants would be freed at the next trial since no additional evidence had been uncovered.” The State Supreme Court granted a new trial to the one Indian convicted in the case, Alec Coudotte, because of the language gap between the Indians and the English-speaking court. From the exceptionalist viewpoint visible in the historical accounts, the Indians are always already guilty for crimes against a people whose race and language they did not share. In the logic of exceptionalism, “American” men are right to make an exception to the rule of law when law itself fails (“the courts were too slow”), and under those circumstances they can claim to elevate vengeance to a superior kind of justice.

While the historical sources tell one story about the traumatic murders and their equally traumatic aftermath, Erdrich writes a significantly different – even a contrapuntal – story in Plague of Doves. Most importantly, she individualizes and exonerates the Indians, who are never given a trial and who insist on their own innocence in the face of a brutal indifference among the white men. Holy Track, thirteen like his namesake, his guardian Asiginak, Cuthbert Peace, and Seraph Milk (who survives to become “Mooshum”) discover the murdered bodies of the Lochren family, save the living baby girl, milk the cows, and try to alert the sheriff anonymously. Asiginak warns prophetically that, in the eyes of Pluto’s Euro-Americans, “We are no-goods, we are Indians, even me. If you tell the white sheriff, we will die” (63). And they do – with dignity, humor, and courage that Erdrich emphasizes. Cuthbert Peace jokes about his large nose: “they have rubbed off the worst of my nose. It is a pity to die now that I am handsome” (70). Asiginak praises Holy Track’s courage in giving himself up, and the men sing with “strength and power” a death song affirming the endurance of their spirits (77-78). While Erdrich also individualizes white members of the lynch mob, some of whom protest against the lynching, she characterizes the leaders as brutal, ignorant racists. Eugene Wildstrand shoots the sheriff’s horse, Hotchkiss rejects Cuthbert’s claim to be “just like you” and slams his rifle into the bleeding Indian, and Emil Buckendorf mocks others who want to spare the young Holy Track (74, 75, 78). In all these ways, Erdrich’s fictional account accentuates the injustice of the executions.

Erdrich also foregrounds the racism expressed in the lynching, made doubly ironic when the murderer of the Lochren family turns out to be a white man. Studies of lynching have commonly observed the disproportionate targeting of people of color for alleged crimes against whites, and they have observed a “negative exceptionalism” in the frequency and cruelty of racially charged lynchings in the United States (Berg x-xi). Like other legal and extralegal executions of American Indians, the lynchings in North Dakota form a coherent part of a generalized, racially motivated pattern of “genocidal colonialism,” as sociologist David Baker writes in his extensive
study of Native executions: “The history of American Indian executions is clearly nested within a sociopolitical context of genocidal colonialism calculated to dispossess American Indians of their Indianism by removing them from their sacred tribal territories, disrupting their traditional cultures, and continuing their marginalized status in US society today” (316-17). As part of their racial difference, the “sexualized perception of Native Americans” among white Midwesterners increased suspicion of Native men, according to Michael Pfeifer: “a myriad of cultural sources identified indigenous men as … a libidinous threat to white women” (87). In Plague, Erdrich highlights the speed of the “rough justice” and the failure to consider any white suspects for murders that included white women (71). Lurking in demented hostility on the edges of the community, the real perpetrator, Warren Wolde – who “flew into disorderly rages and went missing, for days sometimes” (139), and whose “monologues always ended with ’I’ll slaughter them all’” (229) – is neither questioned by authorities nor suspected by anyone until the final pages of the novel. Similarly, the historical reporters are so persuaded by the guilt of the Natives that they do not notice the absence of a broader investigation in the community or the lack of physical evidence in the Spicer deaths.

Another section of Plague of Doves is based on a historical source, also significantly reinterpreted and rewritten by Erdrich. “Town Fever,” originally published as a story in North Dakota Quarterly, draws on “a historical trip that ended up in Wahpeton,” Erdrich tells an interviewer, adding that Daniel Johnston “wrote the account” (Halliday). In his historical narrative, published as a chapter in a volume of the Collections of the North Dakota Historical Society, Johnston describes an overland trek he took in the winter of 1857 to claim land and map townsites along the Red River. As he explains, “we were after money, and the glamour of the ‘millions in it’ brightened all the difficult ways we had come” (421). Johnston writes in 1913, when he is eighty-one years old; he draws on his journal of the expedition fifty-six years earlier.5 The intervening years enable him to look back with ironic hindsight on his own youthful optimism about the “opportunity [that] had knocked at my door” (411), while his age adds wistfulness to his memories of his own physical strength and courage. He concludes that the townsites they surveyed at such cost and risk “fell into ruins,” while the two hundred lots he was paid were “worthless even for tax purposes”; his experience “cured me of the townsite speculation fever so completely that I have never felt a touch of it since” (434). Johnston’s account focuses on the hardships suffered by the group: the intense cold, the effort to clear a path through deep snowdrifts, the sudden blizzards, and especially the constant experience of hunger and near-starvation. While he mentions the other men on the trip, his focus is on events and adventures. He notes the presence of two guides, “French and Chippewa half-breeds named Pierre and Charlie Bottineau,” whose knowledge of the northern plains saves the group on many occasions (411).

5 A footnote explains that Johnston read the account “at the monthly meeting of the Executive Council [of the Minnesota Historical Society], May 13, 1913” (411).
Erdrich’s story of the expedition taken by the fictional Joseph Coutts follows Johnston’s tale closely in its descriptions of the clothing and provisions taken on the expedition, the adventures with blizzards and cold, and the precarious closeness of starvation as the months go on. For example, Johnston describes “a comforter of wool, padded with cotton batting, about three inches thick and firmly quilted. ... We slept with all our clothes on, and there was no chance to change or wash any of them short of the end of our journey. We slept spoon fashion, and when one wanted to turn the rest of us had to turn also” (Johnston 414). Erdrich follows this lively account, echoing the same details: “Once they lowered the great woolen comforter over themselves, the men began to steam up under the batting, and they slept, though every time one rolled over so did the rest. ... But this was only January and there wouldn’t be a chance for any of them to bathe before spring” (Plague 100). Between blizzards, Johnston observes the sun rise with “a brilliant sun dog on each side of it, and a bright crescent swung down above it” (Johnston 416). Joseph Coutts, similarly, wakes to find “the sun had two dogs at either side and was crowned by a burning crescent” (Plague 101). Both Johnston and Joseph Coutts kill an otter and find it inedible; both parties suffer starvation as spring melts flood the plains and prevent the delivery of new supplies; when help arrives, it is only “half a biscuit” for Johnston (427) and, for Joseph, “a dozen hard biscuits” to be shared among the men. Even Johnston’s wry conclusion, that he has been “cured ... of the townsite speculation fever” (434) finds an echo in Joseph’s concluding declaration: “‘Well,’ he said out loud, ‘I’m cured of town fever’” (113).

Because Erdrich follows the Johnston source so closely, the alterations she makes in her fiction clearly reflect her vision and purpose. Most of the changes serve to develop characters; where Johnston is no more interested in his human companions than in the weather and the buffalo, Erdrich focuses on the human actors. Emil Buckendorf, for example, who will participate as a leader of the lynch mob in his later years, has a proto-Nazi paleness, with “fanglike teeth and eyes so pale that there seemed to be a light burning in his skull” (99). He has no sense of humor, taking quick offense at a joke made by one of the Chippewa guides (101); he displays a ready violence – “Emil beat his brothers awake” (103) – and later thinks seriously of cannibalism (111). The Indian guides themselves take on more important roles in Erdrich’s account than they do in Johnston’s, and she characterizes them as men of advanced civilization and extraordinary skill. To be sure, Johnston admires the two guides and reports positively their ability to read the weather and their success in hunting; but he focuses even more attention on his own moments of skill as a hunter (e.g., 430). For Erdrich and for her protagonist Joseph Coutts, Henri and Lafayette Peace are exemplary Native people. Lafayette, she writes, “was fine-made and superbly handsome, with a thin mustache, slick braids, and sly black eyes,” while Henri is “sturdy” and has “an air of captivating assurance” (99). These men own and play a violin, which they treasure, with an artistry described as sophisticated and powerful; they are also “the most devout among the men” (106). Both their religion and their
violin arrived with the French priest who colonized their people (214). While hunger and hardship brutalize the Buckendorfs, Lafayette retains his “scrupulous toilette” (107). Both Peace brothers remain civil and civilized – indeed, they bury the dead man whom the Buckendorfs want to eat (111). The Peace brothers laugh about the men’s flatulence, sing and dance to celebrate their survival, sympathize with the lovelorn man who decides to return to St. Anthony, and hunt so skillfully that they keep the men alive.

Erdrich’s most significant alteration to her source is her characterization of Joseph Coutts as a man far more complex – indeed, far more transformed by his experience – than Daniel Johnston. While Johnston writes in the first person of his “cure” from town fever, Erdrich uses a third-person perspective limited to Coutts to establish his attunement to a Native view of life. Erdrich’s narrative establishes that Coutts, the white grandfather of Antone Bazil Coutts, marries a Native woman because of the events of the journey – or more precisely, because of his own transformation through those events. Coutts begins the journey with fond memories of a lusty white widow who dislikes Indians (98), but returns to marry a niece of the Peace brothers, “a Metis Catholic whose family was very strict” (104). In the meantime, he has come to love and admire the Peace brothers and to respect their Catholic faith: “I envy your faith,” he tells Henri, and when Lafayette places his own crucifix on the starving Coutts, “Joseph felt his heart leap” (110-11). Their religion matters less to Coutts than what he perceives as their spirit, a closeness to non-material values; the near-death experiences of the journey lead him away from an interest in land and profits (the same “millions in it” that attract Johnston [Plague 97]) to a “startling awareness” of the precariousness of life (102) and the need for deeper riches than land and money (103). The early signs of his inward capacity appear in his attentiveness to people and animals, his appreciation for Marcus Aurelius, and his openness to moments of life-altering insight. When an injured ox goes down in the snow, “Joseph leapt toward the ox, hunched over the massive head, breathed his own breath into its foamy muzzle, and spoke in a calm clear voice until the animal groaned to its feet” (103). Like Johnston, Coutts kills an otter; but Coutts’s otter has “regarded him with the curious and trusting gaze of a young child,” and Coutts, unlike Johnston, ends by “weeping helplessly over the gleaming and sinuous body” of the otter (108). When he returns to St. Anthony, Coutts chooses love over wealth, marries the Peace girl, and becomes a lawyer, his grandson reports, in order to defend tribal rights and lands (115).

Erdrich incorporates the two historical sources in order to locate Pluto, a fictional town “named for the god of the underworld” and an apt metaphor for the repression of a shameful history, in a recognizable American

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Rainwater reads this scene as an example of “the text’s decidedly non-Western conception of personhood” (164). I understand Erdrich, instead, as interested in dialogue between Western and Native ideas, so that productive exchanges are possible. Joseph Coutts is a Euro-American with an intuitive respect for nature and animal life that leads him to pity the otter and encourage the ox; he respects the values of the Peace brothers because he shares kindred assumptions.
history of exceptionalist relations to Native people (297). Indeed, the titular image of *The Plague of Doves* evokes European settler colonialism, in John Gamber’s astute reading: “an excessively large, migrating, white mass of life clamping down on the American landscape, overusing the land and starving out the indigenous population bears some slight similarities to Native history” (Gamber 144; see also Noori 12). Euro-American settlers often resembled the Buckendorfs, virtually ignoring signs of cultured and complex intelligence in the indigenous people they encountered. For them, as for the national narrative of Manifest Destiny, Natives were invisible at best, rendered threatening and savage at worst by the racist lens through which they were seen. By placing the same group of Buckendorfs at the head of the lynch mob, Erdrich characterizes the American exceptionalist as blind, irrational, and afraid, as well as racist, vengeful, violent, and cruel. By recalling a history of Native lynching that is as little known and seldom acknowledged in the factual United States as it is in the fictional Pluto, she underscores the disavowal of history that continues to enable the exceptionalist myth in America. Yet Erdrich does not create a story that is as oversimple as the stories the Buckendorfs would have told: in her history of westward exploration, Euro-American Joseph Coutts learns to respect and value Native culture as a result of his experiences with the Indian guides. In Erdrich’s narrative of the lynching, Mooshum and Cuthbert are seeking alcohol (as the historic source indicates the Indians were), and Mooshum is spared because, drunk, he betrayed the others (251). While Frederic Vogeli is as savage as some other German immigrants, his son Johann weeps over the cruelty of the lynching and fights to stop his father’s participation (76). Erdrich’s fiction neither exonerates all Indians nor vilifies all whites; although many of their understandings of and interactions with each other are mistaken, flawed, and damaging, she also represents contacts between Euro-American and Native people that demonstrate the transformative potential for community between the races.

**An Exceptionalist Inheritance**

Under the long shadow of an exceptionalist history, Pluto’s inhabitants in the 1960s and 1970s view the “chosen” American as a person of European descent; this view is held by Indians on the reservation, Euro-Americans in town, and characters of mixed race who live in both places. While all of the characters share this historically conditioned perception, the Euro-Americans feel a compelling nostalgia for the intuitive connection to an exoticized and sexualized nature that they imagine characterizes Natives, while characters with Native ancestry imagine an exoticized and elevated culture in Euro-Americans. As a result, strong passions unite and divide the contemporary inhabitants of Pluto and damage their relationships. Among the attractions, liaisons, and marriages in the novel, many link Native or biracial people with Euro-Americans: children are produced from connections between Eugene Wildstrand and Junesse Malaterre’s mother, John Wildstrand...
and Maggie Peace; marriages occur between Joseph Coutts and the Michif niece of the Peace brothers, their son and a Chippewa woman, Edward Harp and Clemence Milk, Seraph Milk and Junesse Malaterre, Billy Peace and Marn Wolde; and liaisons or attractions without issue occur between Antone Bazil Coutts and Cordelia Lochren, Evelina Harp and Nonette, Neve Harp Wildstrand and Billy Peace, and Neve Harp Wildstrand and Seraph Milk. As Judge Coutts puts it, the community “is rife with conflicting passions. We can’t seem to keep our hands off one another, it is true” (116). In their attractions to one another, “unknown dreams” trouble Pluto’s lovers, as the community’s repressed history intrudes to warp their desires and loves.

The most vivid instance in Plague of history powering the desire for an exoticized Other appears in the relationship between Dr. Cordelia Lochren and Judge Antone Bazil Coutts. Called “C.” by the Judge, Cordelia makes her history clear only in the last pages of the novel; she is the grown up Lochren baby of the first page, miraculously spared by the murderer of her family. Through the Judge’s perspective, their sexual relationship appears obsessive, secretive, and even abusive, in that the adult doctor seduces a teenaged Antone. The two carry on a decades-long affair involving sexual athleticism so sustained that both partners “have trouble with hunger while making love” (274). She refuses his requests to marry, claiming that her professional reputation and “the trust of her patients” render marriage to him impossible (279). In the end, blaming others, she explains that “I was allowed to believe that the lynched Indians had been the ones responsible” for murdering her family and, claiming “an unsteady weakness in their presence,” she refuses to treat Native people (307, 298). In the affair with Antone, however, she finds her own sexuality liberated by his Native blood, as if to demonstrate Pfeifer’s claim that Midwesterners have a “sexualized perception of Native Americans” (87). With Antone, Cordelia finds license to indulge her own physical desires, from which she perceives Euro-Americans as estranged by hypercivilization. The affair provides her a crucial benefit, identified at the end of the novel by Geraldine: it allows Cordelia to disavow her own racism. “They always need an exception,” Geraldine tells Antone (291); he perceives that the doctor’s relationship to him “was more than your garden-variety bigotry. There was history involved, said Geraldine. I understood, then, that I’d known everything and nothing about the doctor. Only later did I realize: … I’d always be her one exception. Or worse, her absolution. Every time I touched her, she was forgiven” (292). The affair with Antone grants Cordelia Lochren the exception she needs; she can disown her investment in the same racism that caused the executions of innocent Natives, while continuing to live inside the exceptionalist and racist values of the lynch mob. While she hides her relationship with Antone from the public, she hides from herself her own responsibility for racism: others are to blame for what she grew up believing, and she herself cannot be blamed for the “paralysis … beyond her control” (298) that prevents her from treating Indians. In this complex way,
Cordelia Lochren demonstrates a refusal of history, including her own recapitulation of the disavowals and repressions intrinsic to American exceptionalism, even as she ironically assumes the role of president of Pluto’s historical society.

Billy Peace has a similarly evasive relationship with the traumatic history of his community and family. Descended from the Peace brothers who guided Pluto’s original settlers and from Cuthbert, lynched by some of those same settlers, Billy turns the spirituality that characterized his ancestors into charismatic preaching. Vengeful and obsessed with power, he founds a cult called “the kindred,” composed of Euro-Americans whom he rules absolutely. He designs a religion that dispenses with God, but establishes a code of absolute obedience to himself (158). In this way he turns a history of American exceptionalism that has scorned his Indian ancestors on its head: he will be the leader of the “chosen people” and their messianic chooser as well, for he personally selects each member of “the kindred.” Early on, he seeks redress for the wrongs committed against Native people; as he takes over Marn’s family farm, for example, he observes, “This was my family’s land, Indian land. Will be again” (152). But as he assumes a cult identity, he seeks to abolish history altogether. He recapitulates exceptionalist practice, writing a “Manual of Discipline” but excepting himself from the laws that regulate his congregation. He decrases labors and punishments for his flock, procreates as he wishes with the women, forbids parents to raise their children, and appropriates the money raised by the group. He dominates Marn and their children: “You are mine. Your lives are mine. I will do with you as spirit wills” (162). In an essay focused on the links between patriarchy and nationalism in Plague, Gina Valentino observes that Billy “turns out to be a windigo,” while Erdrich shows “that the version of nationalism he embodies requires a kind of charismatic leadership that is dangerous” (131-32). Like Cordelia, Billy ignores the very history that has shaped his dreams and deformed his relationships, recapitulating the American exceptionalism that relies on and disavows the extended, systematic, and racist erasure of Native culture and peoples as necessary to the imperialist project.

The novel’s three primary narrators, Evelina, Antone, and Marn, awaken in the course of experience to the “unknown dreams” repressed by an exceptionalist legacy. Unlike Cordelia and Billy, these characters make significant changes because of what they uncover about the past. The novel establishes parallels among these characters’ dreams and awakenings, largely those expressing what Antone Coutts calls “the unbearable weight of human sexual love” (281). Each is mesmerized by a partner who is damaged and damaging, but who appeals to them precisely because of the exceptionalist legacy: attractive blue-eyed Euro-Americans seduce and confuse Evelina and Antone, offering an alternative to the cultural devaluation of Indians, while Marn responds to Billy’s charismatic promise to be the dark-eyed Native savior. Each of their dreams can be traced to the impact of Pluto’s history and to its required repression. All three stories culminate in similar awakenings, when the character experiences a “startling awareness” that makes the “unknown
“Prey to Unknown Dreams”

dream” visible and frees the character to pursue other, better dreams. These parallel recognitions establish links among characters who differ in age, race, gender, and experience, and they are echoed by awakenings in minor characters like Joseph Coutts and Corwin Peace.

Marn, for example, grows up shaped by the bitter aftermath of the hangings: though she doesn’t know it, her uncle Warren has committed the mass-murders for which the Indians were lynched on the Wolde property. Marn finds a compelling escape in Billy, with “the face of Jesus leaning his head forward,” (140), the “loud” and “ecstatic” sexuality of “a bull whale” (153), and the demand for her utter submission; at sixteen, “I was too young to stand against it,” she reports (142). His heritage as a Peace makes her submission to him an ongoing atonement for the sins committed in the name of American exceptionalism, while his epic physical lusts attract her at first. When Billy begins to threaten and punish their children, however, she realizes that she has to rescue them and flee the marriage: “Awakened, things had changed in me” (176). She becomes aware that Billy’s leadership has brought the kindred to “a discipline of the afflictions,” full of self-punishments designed to hold members in perpetual thrall to their own guilt and thereby also in perpetual submission to Billy. While Billy never understands his own need to dominate and control, Marn recognizes the “unknown dream” that has led her to a husband who claims godliness and certainty.

Antone Coutts knows more about Pluto’s history than Marn does; indeed, he serves as an important window into communal history. His attraction to the doctor reflects the shadows of American exceptionalism: he sees in Cordelia the all-American face of European descent, and her seeming choice of him redeems the hurt of that history. Antone records his attraction to Cordelia’s hair (“sun-stroked blond” [282]), her eyes (“a direct blue, the shade of willowware china” [283]), and her bones (which “fitted marvelously beneath her nervous skin” [283]). Sixteen when she seduces him, he finds himself trapped: “once I started having sex with C., I couldn’t leave sex, or leave her, or leave the town” (276). The affair goes on for decades, until his mother throws herself down stairs, winds up in a nursing home, and Antone has his first awakening: “All of a sudden I woke in blackness, alive to desolate knowledge. In that moment, I knew … I’ d wasted my life on a woman” (286). The Judge’s second awakening occurs after his marriage to Evelina’s aunt Geraldine, who calls Cordelia “that doctor who won’t treat Indians”; she treated Antone because “They always need an exception” (291). At this point Antone sees into the heart of American exceptionalism: Cordelia and he have both disavowed the assumptions at the core of their affair about what sort of Americans can be “exceptional.” While Cordelia has used him as “her absolution” (292), he has unconsciously bought into the cultural devaluation of Indians and depended on her “exception” as a sign of his worth; both have disavowed the racism implicit throughout their affair.

Like the other two narrators, Evelina narrates an initiation shaped by the history of her people. Evelina is the novel’s first, youngest, and primary narrator; she knows less than the others about the histories that link her family
and the community. As the granddaughter of one victim of the lynchings and the great-granddaughter of one of the leaders of the lynch mob, she is closely implicated in the tangled history through which American exceptionalism expressed itself in Pluto. Indeed, Evelina inherits mixed loyalty and outrage, together with a deep confusion about her identity, desires, and place in the social world. Like Erdrich the daughter of a Euro-American teacher and a French-Ojibwe woman, Evelina serves as the novel’s primary narrator because her gradual awakening to her inheritance requires her to make sense of a conflicted legacy, one in which colonialism and American exceptionalism battle the forces of attraction and love. The novel juxtaposes three parallel Bildungsroman tales, narrated by three main characters whose initiations in love and sexuality occur when they are sixteen; but Evelina’s heritage leads her to confront the most troubling tangles in Pluto’s history.

In the first section of the novel, Evelina learns several strands of history, both familial and communal. In fact, the first section consists largely of adults’ narration to the Harp children, aged about ten and twelve, of histories that have been suppressed as too violent or frightening until this point in their lives. From their storytelling grandfather Mooshum, Evelina and her brother Joseph hear about the plague of doves in 1896, his marriage to Junesse and near-lynching in 1902, and the lynching of Cuthbert, Asiginak, and Holy Track in 1911. The children have not heard these stories before; Joseph, for example, asks about Cuthbert and Holy Track, “They lived to be old men, right?” (76). When Evelina asks “what happened to the men who had lynched our people” (82), Mooshum tells her that the Buckendorfs and Wildstrands prospered, and her mother complicates her picture of “our people” by telling her that her great-grandfather was Eugene Wildstrand (82, 85). Evelina identifies with the Native side of her heritage, but as she grows up, she sees her implication in histories that preclude easy judgments and simple loyalties. She understands that her classmates and friends have, like herself, lineages pointing to both perpetrators and victims. As the inheritor of these American stories, Evelina intuits complexities even before she can understand them.

The novel develops Evelina’s adolescent confusion over the mixed legacies and histories it chronicles. She leaves Pluto for college, where she finds she doesn’t “fit in with anybody,” including white, Native, or mixed-blood girls (222). As if to disavow both her Native ancestors (and the Native heritage devalued in American culture) and her Euro-American ancestors (and the deadly legacy of their American exceptionalism), Evelina makes Anaïs Nin her model and Paris her goal. In this fantasy escape to a different history, Evelina does not seem to realize that she has chosen the land of the original

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7 Erdrich does not write autobiographical fiction, but she shares a birth in 1954 and a Catholic upbringing with Evelina. Erdrich’s father, like Edward Harp, taught in a reservation school. In an interview, she describes her grandfather, Patrick Gourneau, as “a persuasive man” who loved to talk, much like Mooshum, and notes that her father, “rightly, picked out a paragraph in The Plague of Doves as a somewhat autobiographical piece of the book” (Halliday).
European colonizers of her Ojibwe/Anishinabe ancestors. Ironically, each of her attempts to evade her history only immerses her more closely in it; for example, when she leaves college for an internship in a mental hospital, she finds Warren Wolde there as a patient. She forms a passionate relationship with Nonette (“I didn’t know at the time women could kiss women in that way anywhere but in Paris” [235]) in hope that the affair has “set me outside the narrative” of Pluto: “None of the family stories could touch me. I was in Anaïs’s story now” (235). In fact, though, Nonette’s attraction to her (“You’re an Indian or something, aren’t you … That’s pretty cool” [233]) and hers to Nonette (“She looked French” [230]; and “She is beautiful as someone in a foreign movie, in a book, a catalogue of strange, expensive clothes” [236]) recapitulate the pattern through which Euro-Americans and Indians form attachments to exoticized Others in Pluto. After their sexual encounter, Nonette loses her foreignness as Evelina perceives the “American face” (239) she has had all along: “She looks more and more like a girl in a ski commercial. … Now her eyes are scary cheerleader eyes” (238). Evelina’s attempts to leave America behind have instead led her through the same complex attractions that shaped her ancestors’ histories – and thus led her straight back to the “scary cheerleader” for America, its exceptionalist myth.

Evelina’s awakening, like those of Marn Wolde and Antone Coutts, occurs in stages. In the mental hospital, she literally awakens after days of depressed sleep and turns her attention to her family and to Pluto. She thinks “how history works itself out in the living,” reflects on the perpetrators and victims of the lynching, and concludes, “Now that some of us have mixed in the spring of our existence both guilt and victim, there is no unraveling the rope” (243). When she returns to Pluto, she learns what her Mooshum has repressed and denied: that he got “stinking drunk” and “betrayed the others” in 1911; in effect, Mooshum triggered the hanging of his friends (251). This discovery further clouds the distinction between guilt and innocence, putting guilt on both sides of the rope of Evelina’s inheritance. She responds by accepting what others have disavowed: the complex dualities and irresolvable contradictions of Pluto’s history and her own, including those expressed in Corwin’s music and those in her feelings: “I can’t leave here, I say. And I walk out of that place” (246). She is content to leave her sexual identity undecided, her options open, and her future undetermined.

Disrupting the Exceptionalist Narrative

As told by Emil Buckendorf or Eugene Wildstrand, the story of the land claims in Pluto and the lynchings in 1911 would not be complicated. Instead, the story would constitute a triumphalist narrative focused on the spread of Euro-American justice and power. While Erdrich has not written that story, she provides a brief glimpse of such an exceptionalist narrative in Plague, imagining the story Corwin Peace tells himself after he steals Shamengwa’s violin: “There are two kinds of people – the givers and the takers. I’m a taker.
Render unto Corwin what is due him” (207). An oversimple binary division of the world into those with power and those without it, Corwin’s self-serving logic converts himself into Caesar, erases Christ’s admonishment to render other treasure unto God, and legitimates theft. While Corwin’s self-justification is a simple, secular version of the American exceptionalist narrative, it illustrates the drive to create a coherent myth that consolidates power by the simple act of asserting it. Like the exceptionalist narrative, Corwin’s also deliberately disavows the costs paid by “the givers”: Shamengwa did not “give” the violin, any more than the indigenous Americans “gave” their land to Euro-Americans, but “the takers” in both cases rationalize their theft by asserting that the gain is their “due” by virtue of their identity.

The function served by the American exceptionalist narrative requires it to be clear and simple, as easily understood as a fairytale. Based on the Western teleological view of time itself as shaped by a divine force toward a coherent end, it also follows the nineteenth-century novel’s beginning-middle-end structure. An instance of Lyotard’s grand or meta-narrative, the exceptionalist story assumes a promise-fulfillment shape: after repeated failures in Europe to achieve just government and proper worship, God sends the chosen people to the New World to create the good society on earth. Erdrich’s implicit rewriting of this exceptionalist narrative highlights all it would disavow and foregrounds Native American history, representing the culture of the Native guides, the intelligence and courage of Asiginak, Cuthbert, and Holy Track, the historical Lynchings of these and other Natives, and the multiple fracturings of community left in the wake of a racist construction of America. In writing the counter-history that was suppressed by the exceptionalist myth, Erdrich necessarily creates a narrative form that is far more complex and tangled, far less triumphalist and conclusive, than the fairytale version of American history. In *Plague*, as in all of her fiction, she deploys postmodern literary techniques for clearly political ends.

Erdrich’s narrative design refuses any facile coherence, especially in its representation of time. While events are not dated exactly, the novel represents events from about 1884, 1897, 1901, 1911, 1928, 1963, 1972, and 1974. These various slices of time do not appear in order, nor are events fully told in the first narration; the uncertain relation between stories and parts of stories amplifies their mystery. The novel begins, for example, with a glimpse of the 1911 murder of the Lochrens (1); the story of the subsequent lynching of the Indians is told by Mooshum in about 1963 (54-79), then further clarified in about 1974 when Evelina learns of Mooshum’s role (250-53). Cordelia Lochren adds a final revelation, unknown to other characters or to the community at large, when she blandly notes that Warren Wolde actually slaughtered her family (307-10). Not only does Erdrich scatter pieces of a single story, in this instance to emphasize the bitter irony of the execution of the innocent Natives, but she also obscures connections between different stories related by chronology, causality, or theme. Their arrival on North Dakota land, for example, links the Milk and the Buckendorf families, though the separation of their stories disguises the connections between them. Joseph Milk and his
cultured Native family leave Saskatchewan for North Dakota in 1884 (21-42), and around that same time, the Peace brothers guide the coarse Buckendorfs to the same place (96-113). Because these arrivals of white land speculators and Native people are widely separated and introduced by different narrators, their ironic coincidence is camouflaged (21). Early in the novel, Mooshum tells Evelina the comic story of his rescue from a near-lynching at seventeen: when a farm woman is murdered, “the neighbors disregarded the sudden absence of that woman’s husband and thought about the nearest available Indian. There I was, said Mooshum” (17). Thirty-eight pages later, making no mention of lynch-parties’ tendency to blame Indians, he begins to tell the story of his second lynching ten years later. As multiple characters tell seemingly unconnected stories, the collected narratives yield ironic discoveries, often unknown to the narrators, about damaging encounters between Native Americans and Euro-Americans. The disrupted chronology effectively highlights the hidden, erased, and disavowed linkages between events that leave characters unable to understand their lives and dreams.

Erdrich’s scattered references to a history of injustice, itself disavowed in the mythic chronicle of America, add emphasis to the repeated pattern of recovery and awakening among the primary narrators. Her use of plural points of view serves the same purpose as her dislocation of chronology; both postmodern strategies fracture the narrative surface while highlighting the political nature of the forgetting that is required by American exceptionalism. Her four narrators diverge in many ways: born in four different decades, two are Euro-Americans while two are mixed Chippewa and Euro-American. Cordelia and Antone are childless professionals, while Marn is a mother and waitress and Evelina is a college student. As members of the same community, they know and make occasional reference to each other, but they do not narrate to each other or know each others’ stories. Three of the four, however, share experiences of awakening and discovery, while Cordelia illustrates the costs of a refusal to become aware. Marn, Antone, and Evelina come to understand the impact of American exceptionalism on Native peoples, its distortions of human relationships in the long aftermath of contact, and its repeated impulse to bury and deny Native American history. Evelina, Marn, and Antone find what has been submerged: Evelina literally puts together the story of the lynchings; Antone discovers his lover’s racist use of him as an enabling exception; Marn finds poison at the heart of Pluto’s violent history and in her damaged Native lover. The novel’s mysteries all yield similar answers: American exceptionalism has both erased Native history and disavowed its sustained efforts to hide the traces.

*The Plague of Doves* can be understood as a complex representation of America’s exceptionalist history and its impact on the lives of an evolving American community. All of the stories in the novel probe the relationships between Native Americans, Euro-Americans, and biracial Americans, finding a legacy of privilege accorded to Euro-American descent and a damaging mixture of attraction, revulsion, and misconception distorting the relations between members of different ethnic groups. When Antone Coutts suggests
an identity between “the influence of instinct upon a wolf and history upon a man,” for in both “justice is prey to unknown dreams” (117), he points to the novel’s abiding concern: Americans are driven by history, not through an accurate understanding of the legacy of American exceptionalism, but instead through the “unknown dreams” generated by the disavowals, erasures and repressions it requires. Erdrich’s fiction exposes the exceptionalist face of the American dream in an effort to awaken a more reflective America.

Works Cited


