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Cover Page Footnote
We would like to thank Cori Biddle, Penn State Altoona's assistant librarian, for help with literature and journal searches, as well as Mark Oswalt, the biology lab manager, for helping to set up the experiment.
TRUTH, NOT ACCURACY: NATIVE AMERICAN FICTION VS. WHITE SETTLER COLONIALISM

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Abstract

For centuries, depictions of Native American culture have largely been constructed by White authors and have thus reflected white settler colonialist ideology. This paper suggests that one way to counter this point of view when studying Native American history is to turn to fiction, specifically fiction written by Indigenous authors. Taking as an example Ojibwe author Louise Erdrich’s *Plague of Doves*, a novel based on the real-life massacre of a frontier family in the late nineteenth century, this paper argues that the creative fiction of Indigenous authors can counter the biased, incomplete, and often incorrect official histories of White–Native interactions. In February 1897 in North Dakota, the Spicer family were brutally murdered in their home; almost immediately, Native American men were suspected, and several were soon taken into custody and charged with the crime. When one of the accused had his conviction overturned and was granted a new trial by the state, a mob of White men stormed the jail where the Native men were being held, forcibly removed them, and lynched them. Although the guilt of these men was widely accepted by the White community, the ones who confessed and implicated other Native men changed their stories over time, and the man who had been granted a new trial never wavered in his declaration of innocence. Erdrich’s reimagining of this tragedy lays bare how White greed and racism play into the determination of guilt, and it offers an alternative version of the murders. Although Erdrich’s novel is fictional, it illustrates how White prejudice and colonialist mentality can produce a historical narrative that is “official” but not a reflection of the truth. Ironically, fiction written by Native American writers can provide accounts of White–Native conflicts that are more truthful than traditional historical accounts produced by White settler discourse.

Textbooks, novels, and other works authored by Anglo-American writers have frequently represented Native American history and culture in inaccurate, even racist, ways. In contrast, Indigenous authors, both past and present, have written books that have the potential to give more historically truthful and thorough representations of their people and culture, thereby offering a more valid picture of U.S. history. Using fiction to teach fact may look like a contradiction, but Native
American novels often correct “historical facts” written by Anglo-American scholars that are actually fictions or, at the very least, biased and incomplete.

Whereas recently, some organizations, such as the Smithsonian Institute, have made sincere efforts to revise outdated depictions of Native Americans, most students in the United States continue to receive inadequate and inaccurate information about Indigenous people, often from their history textbooks. These textbooks have offered the barest minimum of information, such as “re-enacting the first Thanksgiving, building a California Spanish mission out of sugar cubes or memorizing a flashcard about the Trail of Tears just ahead of the AP U.S. History Test.”¹ Textbooks are only one part of the problem, however.

Literature featuring Native Americans often contributes to the issue. Even though Native American people and their history have been featured in many famous works of literature, the vast majority of these depictions are very Eurocentric and stereotypical. Laura Ingalls Wilder’s novel Little House on the Prairie, a fictionalized account of the author’s childhood, is only one prominent example of this issue. In one particular example, a Native American man named Soldat du Chêne saves the Ingalls family from being massacred by the Osage tribe. “‘That’s one good Indian!’ Pa said. No matter what Mr. Scott said, Pa did not believe that the only good Indian was a dead Indian.”² Even though this passage seems innocent at first, it is a form of racism that romanticizes Native Americans as primitive and not civilized and complex like Anglo-Americans. This attitude may not be hateful toward Native Americans, but it still does not see them as full, complete people and nations. Had this Osage not saved the Ingalls family, Pa would not have spoken so highly of him. Ma’s attitude toward the Osage is less subtle. When Laura states that she hopes to see a papoose, Ma exclaims, “Whatever makes you want to see Indians?” When Laura asks why Ma doesn’t like Indians, Ma replies, “I just don’t like them.”³ The assumption in both Pa’s “noble savage” attitude and Ma’s blatant racism is the same: Anglo-American priorities should come first. Wilder wrote, “Pa had word from a man in Washington that the Indian Territory would be open to settlement soon,”⁴ which shows a complete disregard for Native American rights and even survival. These passages illustrate how the stories that most students read are told from the settler perspective, ignoring much Indigenous history and culture or, even worse, offering invalid and damaging information about Native people, thus contributing to their continued marginalization and oppression.

³ Wilder, 46.
⁴ Wilder, 47.
Literature written specifically by Native American authors can be used to give not only a better understanding of Indigenous history and culture but also a more thorough and varied one. The tendency in both history and literature by Anglo-American authors has been to represent the European colonial perspective, which includes focusing on Native interactions with colonizers, as though no Native American history existed prior to the arrival of European settlers: “Unknown or forgotten are the many accomplishments and contributions of the Indian before, during and after the arrival of the white man.” In addition, the history of Indigenous people after the settler period of the North American continent is frequently glossed over as if there are no Native Americans left except “reservation Indians,” who, rather than being active participants in their societies, are merely “remnants of a once proud people.” And of course readers encounter the usual stereotypes of savage war parties attacking peaceful pioneers on their way west, apparently for no reason, which suggests that Indigenous culture is violent by nature and implies that society as well as Native people themselves are better off under Anglo-American hegemony. All these tendencies keep Native Americans from being portrayed accurately, thoroughly, and sympathetically.

This paper argues that Native-authored fiction can be used to counter many of these factors and, ironically, can offer a better, more complete account of Indigenous history than many textbooks. This argument can be made using as an example a close, contextualized reading of The Plague of Doves, a novel by Ojibwe author Louise Erdrich published in 2008 as the first book in her Justice series. The story is about the people—Native, White, and mixed race—in the fictional town of Pluto, North Dakota, during the mid- to late twentieth century. The residents are haunted by a lynching that happened in 1911 when three Native Americans, including a thirteen-year-old boy named Holy Track, were killed by a mob. The mob believed the Native Americans were behind the massacre of a farming family known as the Lochrens that left only one baby alive. The story focuses on the life of Evelina Harp, a young woman of both Native American and European descent. She recounts her family’s history, which involves her grandfather, Mooshum, a survivor of the lynching. The book is fiction, but the murders and lynching are based on a real-life event called the Spicer Massacre. Although the massacre in the novel happened in the past, the characters are still haunted by it, thus demonstrating how Anglo violence against Native Americans in the past reverberates through Indigenous cultures today. Erdrich retells the massacre and offers an alternative version of what happened and of the identity of the murderer that undermines stereotypical Eurocentric beliefs about

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Native American violence. Furthermore, the book can offer people a view of the lingering legacy of European colonization, including the effects of colonialism in the form of multigenerational trauma, which is revisited in another novel in the justice series, *The Round House*.

In 1897 in what would become the state of North Dakota, a farming family of six named the Spicers was brutally attacked in their home and was killed, “with the exception of two daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Spicer, who chanced to be away from home at the time.” After a farmer discovered the crime scene, law enforcement started a search for the perpetrators. Although who really killed the Spicer family remains a mystery, many people at the time believed that Native Americans were involved, as reported in contemporary news stories:

> It is believed that Indians may have been the murderers, although there is nothing to substantiate the theory other than that a number of them are said to have been seen loitering about the neighborhood. It is said they were decked with war paint, which is considered proof that they were out for mischief.8

Another newspaper, *The Daily Review*, goes into detail about how the women in the family, Mrs. Rouse and Mrs. Spicer, were supposedly “ravished,” or raped, although sources have shown that Native Americans most likely did not practice rape, as Thomas Abler discusses: “Rape does not appear to have been practiced by Indian warriors in eastern North America. A large number of persons, both female and male, who had been captured by Indians have testified to the fact that rape was not among the abuses Indians heaped on their captives.” The *Daily Review* also speculates about the possible motivation for the massacre while using the stereotype of the drunken Indian: “It is known that an Indian woman was badly beaten by a white woman near Winona not long ago, and it is possible some drunken Indian thought to take revenge on these harmless people.” Despite the article mentioning a Native woman being the victim of White violence, that incident did not spark any outcry, suggesting it was likely a common interracial interaction.

Eventually, two Native men, Alexander Coudot and Frank Black Hawk, who were already under arrest for butchering other men’s cattle, became the chief suspects in the Spicer murders; they both denied any involvement. Shortly afterward,

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8 “A Horrible Deed.”
11 “Winona’s Massacre.”
Paul Holy Track and Philip Ireland, two younger Native men, also became suspects when they were found to be in possession of personal items that had belonged to the Spicers. Holy Track and Ireland eventually confessed and implicated Coudot, Black Hawk, and another Native man, George Defender, and they agreed to be state witnesses against Coudot and Defender. Coudot was found guilty of murder and sentenced to death, but Defender’s trial ended with a hung jury. The North Dakota supreme court reversed Coudot’s conviction, however, because the accusation of Holy Track and Ireland was not enough evidence because they had also confessed to the murders. A new trial was ordered for Coudot.\(^{12}\)

After Coudot’s reversed conviction, he, Holy Track, and Ireland were in jail when a group of vigilantes sought out and lynched them, as detailed in a contemporary newspaper:

> The murder of the Spicer family, near the village of Winona, in this county, on Feb. 21 last, has been summarily avenged. Alexander Coudot, the Indian halfbreed; Paul Holytrack, and Phillip Ireland, full-blooded Indians, were taken from the jail here last night and lynched by a mob of white men. The lynching had been coolly and carefully planned and was carried out without a hitch in the programme. The lynchers worked quietly and with determination. They were in sufficient force to have overcome any resistance that might have been offered, and as there is no such thing as a militia company or other like body in the vicinity, and as there are only a few residents in the town, there was no one to offer any opposition.\(^{13}\)

The way the newspaper appears to applaud the lynching is not only horrific but also seems to take as obvious that the men were guilty, when in fact two of the lynched men had confessed in police custody and changed the details of the massacre significantly in a second confession\(^ {14}\) and the third man had just had his conviction reversed by the state supreme court.\(^ {15}\) All of this can be shown as an example of how Anglo-American settlers enacted their own form of frontier justice that did not consider the rights of the Native Americans and that assumed they were guilty.

Erdrich uses the Spicer massacre as inspiration but changes the details to give the Native American point of view, to criticize the role of White people, and to redirect our attention to the fact that settler violence historically surpassed the violence perpetrated by Native people. The setting of the novel itself offers a clue about settler ignorance and arrogance. *The Plague of Doves* is set in the fictional town


\(^{13}\) “Massacre of the Spicer Family Is Avenged By a Mob,” *Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), November 15, 1897, https://www.newspapers.com/image/33863272/.

\(^{14}\) Beidler, 3.

\(^{15}\) Beidler, 9.
of Pluto, which is ironic because Pluto is the name of the Roman god of death and the underworld, and it is within this town that death takes place, as with the lynching of the Native men. The town’s name also reveals the ignorance of the people who founded it. Cordelia Lochren, the sole survivor of the murdered family, explains, “Frank Harp suggested Pluto and it was accepted before anyone realized they’d named a town for the god of the underworld.”

Although this passage at first glance seems irrelevant, it functions as an example of settler arrogance and ignorance. The founders of Pluto did not take into consideration that they would be naming their potentially prosperous town after a god that does not represent what they envisioned. The town does end up being a place of death for the Native American habitants, however.

In addition to referring to this pagan god of the dead, the book alludes to the Christian religion brought by Europeans and changes the Christian symbolism into something negative. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a dove is a bird, but it can also be “a messenger of peace and deliverance from anxiety, as was the dove to Noah.” Doves are a symbol of peace in the Christian religion. For the Native people of Pluto, however, the doves are a plague, just as the settlers and their religion are. Evelina recounts, “The doves ate the wheat seedlings and the rye and started on the corn. They ate the sprouts of new flowers and the buds of apples and the tough leaves of oak trees and even last year’s chaff.”

The doves clearly symbolize how settlers took everything, including land, from the Native people, leaving nothing for the Indigenous people to salvage.

Erdrich’s novel exposes both the legacy of European colonization and the violence inflicted upon the Native people, which continues in the present, specifically using historical events such as the massacre. Erdrich makes this clear in *The Plague of Doves*; Deborah Madsen discusses how the misfortunes of Native Americans, such as land division, historical displacement, and murder, are advantages to Anglo-Americans who have used them in order to gain power. Madsen writes that Erdrich uses characters like Evelina and Judge Antone Coutts, who are mostly unaware of their family history, to illustrate White privilege and the impact it has had on all generations.

An example of the legacy of European colonization in North America is shown in *The Plague of Doves* when Evelina describes her future grandmother who is Métis, a person who has both European and Native American ancestry:

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She had the pale, opaque skin and slanting black eyes of the Metis or Michif women in whose honor the bishop of that diocese had written a warning to his priests, advising them to pray hard in the presence of half-breed women, and to remember that although their forms were inordinately fair their hearts were savage and permeable.\textsuperscript{20}

The way Evelina describes the clergy’s perception of Native or Métis women reflects what most Anglo-American people have projected onto Native women, which has justified their sexualization and domination.

\textit{The Plague of Doves} depicts the greed of settlers and how it directly and indirectly affects the lives of Native Americans. To further demonstrate her point about the legacy of colonialism, Erdrich uses the cannibalistic monster known as the wiindigoo to represent the colonizers, which is common in Native American stories: “Wiindigo—otherwise known as colonization—is the name of the monster that was killing us.”\textsuperscript{21} In fact, one of Mooshum’s stories, “Liver-Eater Johnson,” depicts a type of wiindigoo; the title character, who is a trapper, not only hates Native Americans but is also a cannibal: “He then related the horrifying story of Liver-Eating Johnson’s hatred of the Indian and how in lawless days this evil trapper and coward jumped his prey and was said to cut out the liver from his living victim and devour the organ right before their eyes.”\textsuperscript{22} Although the word wiindigoo is not said in the story, it is implied in the liver eater’s description; the liver eater/wiindigoo works as a metaphor for settler greed for land and hatred for Native people, as Madsen discusses: “Greed for land and a willingness to murder in order to satisfy the hunger for land defines the wiindigoo logic of settler colonialism.”\textsuperscript{23} Like the wiindigoo’s constant craving for human flesh, settlers have always hungered for Native land to settle in and will do anything to fulfill that desire.

\textit{The Round House} is the second book of Erdrich’s “Justice Trilogy.” It takes place in 1988. The story has Joe Coutts, a thirteen-year-old Ojibwe boy and the son of Antone Coutts from \textit{The Plague of Doves}, investigating, with the help of his friends, the attack and rape of his mother, Geraldine. Like \textit{The Plague of Doves}, \textit{The Round House} tackles themes such as the colonial legacy and settler greed. For example, Linda Lark, the sister of Joe’s mother’s rapist, who is White, explains to Joe why her brother, Linden, raped Geraldine:

I saw the monster in my brother way back in the hospital and it made me deathly ill. I knew that someday he would let it loose. It would lurch out with

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Erdrich, \textit{Plague of Doves}, 11–12.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Bezhigobinesikwe Elaine Fleming, “Nanaboozhoo and the Wiindigo: An Ojibwe History from Colonization to the Present,” \textit{Tribal College} 28, no. 3 (Spring 2017), https://tribalcollegejournal.org/nanaboozhoo-wiindigo-ojibwe-history-colonization-present/.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Erdrich, \textit{Plague of Doves}, 37.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Madsen, 37.
\end{itemize}
part of me inside. Yes. I was part of the monster too. I gave and gave, but know what? It was still hungry. Know why? Because no matter how much it ate, it couldn’t get the right thing. There was always something it needed.\textsuperscript{24}

This passage refers to Anglo-American greed even though this book is set during a time when colonization is no longer the official policy yet violence against Native people continues.

The \textit{Round House} connects to the wiindigoo and \textit{The Plague of Doves} in addition to bringing in a sexual component to the monster. In this case, the wiindigoo, which is Linden Lark, robs Geraldine of her body through rape just as colonizers robbed Native people of their lands and cultures, often through sexual assault as well as other forms of violence. Once again, Erdrich is correcting the historical record regarding who suffers rape perpetrated by whom, as mentioned above regarding the newspaper’s report that the Spicer women were raped, an example of how Anglo-American culture has projected its own sexual sins on non-White people while facing no consequences for such actions. Seema Kurup observes, “Geraldine’s assault has to do as much with power as with brutal sexual violence. The perpetrator, Linden Lark, is a non-Native member of the surrounding community and carries out his assault with impunity, as the tribal courts are powerless to prosecute him.”\textsuperscript{25} This analysis links rape to theft of Native land and identity and also illustrates how helpless modern Native Americans are in the face of injustices that stem from colonialism. Although the action of taking Indigenous land is no longer official government policy, the legacy it has left behind is still active in the sexual assaults of Native American women. According to Amnesty International, “Native American and Alaska Native women are more than 2.5 times more likely to be raped or sexually assaulted than other women in the USA. … According to the U.S. Department of Justice, in at least eighty-six per cent of the reported cases of rape or sexual assault against American Indian and Alaska Native women, survivors report that the perpetrators are non-Native men.”\textsuperscript{26} \textit{The Round House} and \textit{The Plague of Doves} deliver Erdrich’s message of the struggles that Native people face in the modern world because of the legacy of the past. The fact that both of these books are connected in terms of themes and setting strengthens the delivery of the author’s message.

When \textit{The Plague of Doves} switches from Evelina’s point of view to Antone’s, he tells Geraldine that the men who lynched the Natives very likely targeted the wrong people: “I told her that later on the vigilantes admitted that they were probably mistaken. She hadn’t known that.”\textsuperscript{27} Antone’s words can be linked to Beidler’s

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\item \textsuperscript{24} Louise Erdrich, \textit{The Round House} (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 300.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Seema Kurup, \textit{Understanding Louise Erdrich} (University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 66.
\item \textsuperscript{26} “Maze of Injustice,” Amnesty International, August 8, 2011, https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/maze-of-injustice/.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Erdrich, \textit{Plague of Doves}, 92.
\end{itemize}
Murdering Indians, which documents several different scenarios of what may have happened: two of the older Native men enlisted the help of Ireland and Holy Track; Black Hawk and Coudot committed the robbery in order to acquire whisky; Black Hawk was the leader of the massacre; or the five Native men had nothing to do with the massacre. Regardless of what could have occurred, the fact that Geraldine did not know what happened shows that she learned only one version of events, which, like Anglo-American history, was presented as objective truth. Later, near the end of the book, Cordelia Lochren, the lone survivor of the massacre, who grows up to become a doctor, is treating a senile man named Warren Wolde, who pays her a lot of money. At first, she believes that he is doing this because he is sympathetic about the loss of her family: “I could perhaps believe that the money gifts and the legacy were only marks of Wolde’s sympathy for the tragic star of my past, and later gratitude for what I had done. I might be inclined to think so, were it not for many small, strange truths.” Later, however, she realizes that the real reason Wolde was giving her the money was because he, and not the Native men, was the real killer of her family: “My last act as the president of Pluto’s historical society is this: I would like to declare a town holiday to commemorate the year I saved the life of my family’s murderer.”

Even though the identity of the Spicers’ murderer remains a mystery, the way Erdrich makes a White man the real killer in her story brings up the possibility that the Native men who got lynched were scapegoats. In addition, Erdrich refocuses the audience’s attention onto the prevalence of settler violence against Native Americans, which historically was greater than Native violence.

Although overt forms of colonialism have given way to less obviously racist exploitation, the legacy of colonialism is still alive, with fragile relationships between Native Americans and non-Indigenous violence toward Native people, natural resources being taken from Native people and exploited, and the federal government’s lack of help to address the needs of Native Americans. These are all topics that Louise Erdrich’s The Plague of Doves, as well as The Round House, brings to the table. Even though physical violence directed against Indigenous people by White people is far less prevalent than in previous eras, that does not mean that Americans should put the past behind them. The past has led directly to unfortunate events such as those related in these novels, as well as the lingering effects, such as the ongoing sexual violence against Indigenous women. Horrific events like sexual assaults and violence against Native people still happen today and will continue to occur if something is not done to better address the needs of the Indigenous populations, beginning with an honest assessment of the past that foregrounds Indigenous voices.

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28 Beidier, 2–3.  
29 Erdrich, Plague of Doves, 310.  
30 Erdrich, Plague of Doves, 311.
Bibliography


