

“I AM A PRIEST”: THE CONSTRUCTION AND ADAPTABILITY OF IDENTITY IN *THE
LAST REPORT ON THE MIRACLES AT LITTLE NO HORSE*

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ABSTRACT

The following paper investigates the construction and adaptability of identity, especially in regard to gender, religion, and culture in Louise Erdrich's novel *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. The goal of this paper is to explore how a broader understanding of one aspect of identity, can lead to a more complex understanding of other aspects of identity. This work performs textual analysis to examine how the character Agnes/Father Damien's gender and their religious persona are constructed in the novel as they blend their religious beliefs and their masculinity/femininity as well as how this causes them to exist in an in-between state where they are both man/woman and Catholic/Ojibwe in their spiritual beliefs. Secondary research is used to give context about gender, religion, culture, and identity, as well as how those aspects relate specifically to *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*.

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INTRODUCTION

Louise Erdrich's 2001 novel and finalist of the National Book Award for Fiction *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, introduces the concept of in-betweenness, most notably when it comes to gender, but by extension, religious beliefs and culture as well. The protagonist, Father Damien, is soon revealed to be a woman named Agnes DeWitt who has somewhat successfully posed as a man for many years.¹ The novel is partially set in 1996, where Father Damien, who "unveil[s] his gender only to his readers" (Rader 222), is being interviewed by Father Jude Miller. Father Jude has come to the reservation to inquire about Sister Leopolda, otherwise known as Pauline Puyat, a nun who is being considered for a nomination of sainthood. However, the novel also flashes back to before Agnes came to the reservation, as well as the decades that she served as a priest at Little No Horse. Agnes/Father Damien's gender identity has an impact on their identity as a whole. Because Father Damien exists in a space of gender "in-betweenness," he is able to see that gender is constructed. His state of in-betweenness and the way that it affects the manner in which he interacts with the Ojibwe also causes him to be accepted and honored by the Ojibwe people of Little No Horse in a way that previous priests had not been. Despite the gender identity of Erdrich's priest being an important aspect of the plot, the critic Daniel Mendelsohn dismisses the priest's complex identity in his review of the novel, saying that "Agnes/Damien's secret identity and the ongoing moral crisis it creates is meant to provide *The Last Report* with a meaningful narrative frame, but it's really just a gimmick. Gender, deception, concealment – none of these is ever really linked in a profound way to the

¹ Because Erdrich switches between the "he" and "she" pronouns throughout *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, I have alternated between both as well depending on the textual context. When referring to both Father Damien and Agnes in the same sentence, I use the "they" pronoun.

numerous stories you get here; if Father Damien had been a man all along, the novel wouldn't be any different." However, as Pamela J. Rader writes, "Agnes is at the heart of Father Damien's success as a priest because her spiritual and community devotion combines her performed gender and profession" (231). This combination of "performed gender" with Agnes pretending to be a man and "profession" which she does in order to be a priest, helps to "reinststate ... a syncretic tradition wherein Ojibwe and Catholic beliefs fuse, marking Agnes's multilayered assimilation process" (221). It is because Agnes/Father Damien exists in an in-between state where they are both man/woman, the blending of gendered behaviors in turn extends to religious beliefs, where they are also Catholic/Ojibwe when it comes to their spiritual beliefs.

Gender and colonialism, particularly in a religious context, are major aspects that Erdrich addresses through the character of Father Damien in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. Erdrich's novel comments on how culture and religion (more specifically, Native American culture and Ojibwe beliefs versus Euro-American culture and Catholicism) impact the meaning of gender, especially for the character of Father Damien. As Lydia R. Cooper points out:

Much of the scholarship on the novel's white, assigned-female protagonist, Father Damien Modeste, has focused either on Damien as a transgender character (a EuroWestern concept that is anachronistic to the majority of Damien's life in the early twentieth century) or on Anishinaabe notions of gender, describing Damien as Two-Spirit – even though Damien is white. (622)

However, instead of being transgender or Two-Spirit, Father Damien actually exists in an in-between space when it comes to gender, because he is not completely female (his biological sex) or completely male (his chosen gender), but instead considers himself solely a priest. Because

Agnes believes that she has been called by God to replace the original Father Damien, she disguises herself as a man to serve as a priest on the Little No Horse Reservation, at which point she realizes that the gendered aspects of Father Damien, like every person that she has been before, is only a role that she is playing. It is this realization that gender is a construct that helps shape my argument throughout the paper.

Because Catholic and Ojibwe belief systems are the two major religions that impact Father Damien in the novel, I will give some context about both of them. Catholicism is the largest denomination of Christianity, has had a major impact on Western civilization, and has introduced Christianity to many parts of the world. The Catholic Church is hierarchical, with the pope, who interprets divine revelation, appointing and presiding over the cardinals. Priests are ordained to serve in local churches, called parishes. Though women can be nuns in the Catholic Church, according to the Code of Canon Law of the Catholic Church, “a baptized male alone receives sacred ordination validly” (Canon 1024). In the apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* of John Paul II, he declares “that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgement is to be definitely held by all of the Church’s faithful,” citing Pope Paul VI, who said that the Catholic Church does not ordain women for these reasons:

The example recorded in the Sacred Scriptures of Christ choosing his Apostles only from among men; the constant practice of the Church, which has imitated Christ in choosing only men; and her living teaching authority which has consistently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God’s plan for his Church.

Like other Christians, Catholics are monotheistic and believe that Jesus is the son of God, who died for the sins of the world and was resurrected. A major belief that distinguishes Catholicism from Protestant Christianity is the veneration of the saints, especially the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus (Gillis 173).

For the Ojibwe, spirits are an important part of their spiritual beliefs because they are the source of life and existence, and can be symbolized through both animal spirits as well as by the more monotheistic Giche Manidoo, or “Great Spirit” (“Anishinaabe”). The power of the spirits can be accessed through special rituals such as songs, dances, and dreams. With the introduction of Christianity to the United States, many Ojibwe people became Christians with varying degrees of relationship between their Christian beliefs and traditional Ojibwe practices. While there are Ojibwe Christians who reject Ojibwe religious traditions and Ojibwe traditionalists who reject Christianity, for others, “a principled respect for religious difference promotes a distinctively Ojibwe tolerance, where the boundaries between Christianity and Ojibwe traditions are maintained, out of respect for the distinctive ways” (“Anishinaabe”). However, there are also Ojibwe Christians who “have creatively indigenized the missionaries’ religion in a manner that fuses Christian practice and belief and core Ojibwe values and beliefs” (“Anishinaabe”).

Sacred stories that are passed down in an oral tradition are also important to the Ojibwe. A significant figure that appears in many of these stories is the trickster Nanabozho (also known as Nanabush (Robinson), Nanaabozho, or Nanapush (“Native American Legends”), who brought culture to the people, but who also likes to play tricks and break the rules. Trickster stories in particular “have served a variety of roles, from entertaining community members to transmitting traditional knowledge to teaching about right from wrong ... [They] illustrate the centrality of relationships between family members, clans and nations, while highlighting the tension between

individual motivations and those of the larger social group” (Robinson). Stories about tricksters are also important because “in bending the structures of society, tricksters reveal (and occupy) a realm in between those structures, one that demonstrates how social norms can be challenged, redefined and overturned” (Robinson). Modern literature, especially in urban society, has also used the character, as “off-reserve Indigenous peoples ... identify with the trickster as an adaptable but authentically Indigenous persona” (Robinson). For example, in her novel *Son of a Trickster* (2017), Eden Robinson used the trickster archetype “to challenge patriarchal power structures and Eurocentric notions of women’s sexuality and domesticity. Similarly, for two-spirit people, the trickster is a relatable identity; in some cultures, tricksters are non-gendered and consequently occupy the spaces in between traditional gender roles” (Robinson).

I use the work of multiple theorists to talk about gender in relation to Father Damien in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. In *The Sacred Hoop* (1986), Paula Gunn Allen discusses Native American feminism and talks about how Native Americans have based their diverse social systems on a woman-focused worldview that has affected people of all genders. Allen states that “there were and are gynocracies – that is, woman-centered tribal societies in which matrilocality, matrifocality, matrilinearity, maternal control of household goods and resources, and female deities of the magnitude of the Christian God were and are present and active features of traditional tribal life” (3-4). She also argues that it’s important to look at how Native Americans talk about tribal systems as Western studies “view tribalism from the cultural bias of patriarchy and thus either discount, degrade, or conceal gynocratic features or recontextualize those features so that they will appear patriarchal” (4). Allen, as a Native American author herself, helps to give some context about gender in Native American societies and how that compares to and has been changed by EuroWestern society. This is relevant to

Father Damien's story as he is white and Catholic (coming from EuroWestern society) and serves as a priest on an Ojibwe reservation.

The second theorist that shaped my analysis of *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* is Judith Butler in their article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988). Butler focuses on the idea that gender is performative, which means that because gender identity is established through behavior, different gender identities can be constructed through different behaviors. Hence, gender is a construct, which means that it can be changed. As Butler argues, "Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or internalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis" (522). They go on to say that because gender is performative, "the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (523). This is something that Agnes picks up on throughout *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* as she is able to perform the duties of Father Damien, a male priest, despite being biologically female.

The third theorist that I use to establish context about in-betweenness for my analysis is Liora Moriel and her article "Passing and the Performance of Gender, Race, and Class Acts: A Theoretical Framework" (2005). Moriel argues that passing essentially "puts in question judgements based on identity stereotypes that people use to simplify their social environments" (167). Building off of Philomena Essed, who said that "We all have multiple identities. Multiple identifications allow us to be flexible in dealing with different people" (170-171), Moriel goes on to talk about what those different identities entail. Because, as Moriel explains, identity can exist

of “multiple factors along a grid rather than an axis,” it’s important to keep in mind that “people are not always everything that they are all at once – every variable that makes them who they are, discernible as their own color, ethnicity, historical and geographical configurations, sex, gender, sexuality, politics, ideology, style, physical appearance, intelligence, and so on” (171). This is a realization that Agnes has in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* after she has first started to pretend to be Father Damien – she has had multiple identities in the past, and they have all been facets of who she was instead of her whole identity. I build on Moriel’s discussion about “passing” as different identities to explain Agnes’s state of in-betweenness when it comes to her gender, religion, and culture. However, the most important aspect of all of Agnes’s passing is that she considers her true identity to be a priest.

Using Erdrich’s novel *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, especially the character of Agnes/Father Damien, I argue that a broader understanding of one aspect of identity, can lead to a more complex understanding of other aspects of identity as well. This argument is influenced by how Agnes/Father Damien’s gender and their religious persona are constructed in the novel as they blend their religious beliefs and their masculinity/femininity, causing them to exist in an in-between state where they are both man/woman and Catholic/Ojibwe in their spiritual beliefs. However, above all, Agnes considers herself a priest because she “is authorized to perform the sacred rites of a religion especially as a mediatory agent between humans and God” (“priest). Though this is a position that the Catholic Church has not authorized her to have because of her biological sex, she believes that it is a position that God has appointed for her. In the first chapter, I begin by defining gender and investigating the significance that social expectations have on gender, as well as how Agnes comes to realize that gender is a construct. In the second chapter, I discuss how Father Damien’s belief systems change to an in-between state,

the reasons for this flexible belief system, and what that flexibility ultimately implies about his spirituality and morality, as well as how that relates back to the concept of gender. In the third chapter, I argue that by being more fluid in her gender and by occupying a social space that would have been closed to women, Agnes inadvertently embodies Native tradition, which eventually serves to help bond her with the Ojibwe and she is able to come to the conclusion that forcing the Ojibwe to convert to Catholicism would do more harm than good. Finally, I conclude with an analysis of all of these aspects of the novel – gender, religion, and settler colonialism – to show how Erdrich is able to show a broader understanding of identity as complex and fluid.

LITERATURE REVIEW

My analysis of the role of gender and intersectional belief systems in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* is supported by previous scholarship that has looked at several of these aspects in the novel, as well as in Erdrich's other novels. In "Reading Between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich," Catherine Rainwater (1990) highlights that "Erdrich's books are rife with conflicting cultural codes to which the reader must respond" (407). In "'Deadly Conversions': Louise Erdrich's Indictment of Catholicism in *Tracks*, *Love Medicine*, and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*," Brian D. Ingrassia (2015) refutes Rainwater's essay on spirituality in Louise Erdrich's novels, arguing that though Rainwater is correct in asserting that Erdrich presents Ojibwe and Catholic beliefs as conflicting codes, Erdrich does not treat the two beliefs as equal, but instead that Ojibwe beliefs are better than Catholicism. My paper builds on the religious aspect of in-betweenness that both Rainwater and Ingrassia present in their essays.

Another aspect that my paper builds on is connecting Catholicism and Ojibwe spiritual beliefs to the idea of gender and how it should be portrayed. In "Medicine Dresses and (Trans)Vestments: Gender Performance and Spiritual Authority in Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* and *Four Souls*," Ann M. Genzale (2016) argues that "it is Agnes/Damien['s] transgressions of religious and societal customs rather than adherence to them that bolster their religious authority within and beyond the reservation community" (29). In the chapter titled "Women-Men as 'Shamans,' Medicine Persons, and Healers" from the book *Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures*, Sabine Lang writes about how in some Native American cultures, people who rejected one gender and embraced a blend of gendered traits within themselves had religious roles that were specific to

people like them. These people were sometimes referred to by the name two-spirit, a term that is used for a Native American person who identifies as having both a masculine and feminine spirit. However, in “The Problem of Trans-Figuration: Gender, the Jesuits, and the Ojibwe in Louise Erdrich’s *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*,” Lydia R. Cooper (2020) points out that though two-spirit does help to reveal Ojibwe beliefs about gender, it is a problematic term to refer to Agnes/Father Damien as because they are white. Instead, as Deirdre Keenan (2006) suggests in “Unrestricted Territory: Gender, Two Spirits, and Louise Erdrich’s *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*,” comprehension of gender fluidity in Native American culture such as two-spirits used alongside the novel can provide ways of understanding how there are sex-gender systems that resist the Western idea of a binary system of gender. Though she also admits that labeling Agnes/Father Damien as two-spirit is problematic, she recognizes that framing Agnes/Father Damien into the context of the two-spirit tradition helps readers understand Native American gender identity. In “From Wallace to Wishkob: Queer Relationships and Two-Spirit Characters in *The Beet Queen*, *Tales of Burning Love*, and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*,” Lisa Tatonetti (2012) focuses on how, by looking at these three texts, we can see how Erdrich’s presentation of queer characters develops across her body of works. Tatonetti writes that “her texts first highlight the fluidity of gender and the constructed nature of heterosexuality and later also invoke the importance of specifically indigenous, or two-spirit, understandings of the range and variety of genders and sexualities” (209). Though I look at only one of these novels – *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* – in my paper, I also focus on how acknowledging gender fluidity in Native American tradition is significant for understanding why the Ojibwe of Little No Horse accept Father Damien’s gender fluid identity. However, I also agree with Cooper and Keenan that

though Father Damien is not two-spirit himself and as a non-Native, he should not be called a two-spirit, by positioning him in a context where two-spirit identities are accepted, we can understand his interactions with the Ojibwe community as well as gender/power dynamics in their culture, especially after the impacts of settler colonialism.

The third aspect that my paper builds on is the themes of settler colonialism in the novel and how that relates to Father Damien's religion. In "'We Speak of Everything': Indigenous Traditions in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*," P. Jane Hafen (2011) argues that Erdrich is actually decolonizing by reinterpreting religious institutions in the novel. Hafen explains that Erdrich, because she is "informed in the traditions of Western civilization, including Christian Catholicism, yet rooted in Ojibwe storytelling, language, and worldview" she is able to "exploit ... the narrative to reaffirm decolonizing processes" (85-86). Hafen also says that though Erdrich uses overt Catholic themes in the novel, because the spirituality in Erdrich's novel is "rooted in indigenous concepts" (86), that spirituality is able to decolonize Catholicism as an institutional religion. Ludmila Martanovschi (2021) also contributes to the conversation about colonialism in the article "'This is Our Church': Mediating Religious Beliefs, Ceremonial Practices and Multiple Mobilities in Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*," where she points out that Erdrich often writes about the consequences of religious conversion and the resilience of the Native Americans when facing settler colonialism in her fiction. In "Postcolonial and Critical Race Theory in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*," Mark Shackleton (2011) argues "that a number of the rhetorical strategies of post-colonial theory can be applied to *Last Report*, and by implication to a wider range of Native American writing, at the intersection between post-colonialism and critical race theory" (67-68). Some of the terms and background from this article in particular were helpful for writing chapter

three, but Shackleton focuses more on rhetorical strategies, post-colonial, and critical race theory, while I use textual analysis, and focuses on how the novel critiques settler colonialism, such as Hafen argues, especially how that intersects with Catholicism and conversion of the Native Americans, such as Martanovschi argues.

Finally, there have been several authors who have looked at the complexity of identity in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. In the article “‘I Meant to Have But Modest Needs’: Louise Erdrich’s *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*,” Dee Horne (2008) writes that though many critics of the novel have read the multiple narratives as “‘tangled,’ ‘flat’ and inconsistent,” she proposes a reading of the narratives “as illustrative of the tension and complexity inherent in identity generally, and in the colonial context in the fictional Anishinaabe reservation of Little No Horse specifically” (276). Horne points to a specific quote from Erdrich where she claimed that the novel isn’t really about gender, which is what many of the critics focus on, but is instead “about a search for identity” (276). Pamela J. Rader (2007) touches on this search for identity and how it relates to gender in “Dis-robing the Priest: Gender and Spiritual Conversions in Louise Erdrich’s *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*,” where she writes that “Erdrich’s treatment of gender in *Last Report* reinstates a syncretic tradition wherein Ojibwe and Catholic beliefs fuse, marking Agnes’s multilayered assimilation process” (221). Megan Milota (2016) builds off of John McClure’s argument that “Native American characters in contemporary fiction are usually ‘ontologically and culturally unhoused,’ and the narratives in which they are presented detail the difficult, often impossible or dangerous return to their culture, tradition, and religion” (467) in “Return of the (non-)Native: Coming Home in Louise Erdrich’s *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*.” By using this novel, Milota wants to “focus on the ways in which Erdrich’s fiction thematizes Catholic and

Native American beliefs, both confirming certain aspects of the postmodern belief McClure describes whilst defying the popular, sometimes pat, understandings of home that rely on clear-cut, bounded categories and definitions” (468). She also points out that “Erdrich’s fiction describes multiple forms of belief as well as a variety of means for returning or feeling at home, all of which are distinctly Ojibwe even if they are not dependent upon tribal status or blood ties” (Milota 468). My paper builds on the idea of “coming home” for Father Damien, but instead of using those terms to describe it, I focus my paper instead on how Father Damien uses his unique religious beliefs that are both Catholic and Ojibwe to construct his identity. In “A Hope for Miracles: Shifting Perspectives in Louise Erdrich’s *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*,” Annette Van Dyke (2008) argues that by using a non-Native character like Agnes/Father Damien who adapts to the Ojibwe culture, Erdrich is able to shift the readers from a Eurocentric perspective to one that encompasses Native American perspectives. I build on all of these ideas about identity to argue that a blending of religious beliefs, culture, and gender causes Agnes/Father Damien to exist in an in-between state for all of these aspects.

CHAPTER ONE. “ROCKING BETWEEN GENDERS”: GENDER AS A CONSTRUCT

In one regard, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* is a commentary on gender and the role that culture and religion, in this case, Catholicism and Ojibwe beliefs, have had on how gender is defined. In fact, gender in Erdrich’s novel is what many scholars focus on, emphasizing Father Damien’s gender fluidity and how it relates to Ojibwe gender identities. However, many scholars also make the mistake of focusing too much on how Father Damien aligns with the Ojibwe idea of gender fluidity instead of concentrating on Father Damien himself and how he as a EuroWestern character becomes a gender fluid person, even before coming into contact with the Ojibwe. For example, Father Damien realizes that gender is a construct and all of his personas are just roles that he’s performing – well before learning that the Ojibwe accept people who are gender fluid. Though comprehension of gender in Ojibwe culture is important for understanding why they accept Father Damien as a priest despite knowing that he’s a woman, Father Damien’s gender identity is shaped more so by events that impacted him before his arrival to the reservation, as well as by his original religion, Catholicism. In this chapter, I argue that though Father Damien is a woman, he has been divinely appointed to priesthood, which leads to his realization that gender is a construct, and that his gender fluidity ultimately endears him to the Ojibwe.

The definition of gender is “a personal label used to denote how a person identifies on a feminine to masculine spectrum ... Most often infants are assigned one of two binary genders at birth (male/boy or female/girl) based on genitalia” (“Common”). Gender expression is also an aspect of this and is defined as “a person’s outward presentation including clothing, hair style, ... speech patterns, body language, etc. that is understood to display feminine, masculine, or androgynous characteristics based on a given culture’s ideas of gender roles and expression”

(“Common”). *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* comments on the impact that culture and religion have had on the way that gender is defined and expressed, for example, whether gender is binary and based on biological sex, but also sexual orientation, and who is allowed to be in leadership roles, especially religious leadership roles. In the case of Agnes, whenever she is questioned about her gender identity, she responds only that she is a priest. While the white people in her life, such as her lover and fellow priest Gregory Wekkle, question how she can be a woman and a priest, most of the Native Americans on the reservation accept her as nonbinary and as a religious leader.

When Agnes, after she disguises herself as Father Damien, first interacts with someone from the reservation, she notes what she thinks is respect for her outwardly male appearance versus what she experienced when she looked female. However, when looking at the Ojibwe man, Kashpaw’s thoughts, we see that he sees right past the disguise that Agnes has on: “the priest was clearly not right, too womanly. Perhaps, he thought, here was a man like the famous Wishkob, the Sweet, who had seduced many other men and finally joined the family of a great chief as a wife, where he had lived until old, well loved, as one of the women” (64). There are two significant things to note from these lines. First of all, not only does Kashpaw present an acceptance of gender fluidity, but also different forms of sexual orientation. Second, Kashpaw notices Father Damien’s feminine attributes and accepts them. Throughout the novel, Father Damien is able to hide his feminine attributes from most other white people, who, because of social and religious conventions, would be against him being a priest as a woman, because only men can be priests in the Catholic faith (canon 1024), while the Native Americans on the reservation notice that Father Damien is actually a woman and don’t care because their gender conventions, especially in the religious sphere, are not as restrictive (Mayo 269). However, there

are two exceptions to this: Gregory Wekkle, another white priest who discovers Agnes's secret and becomes her lover, while also attempting to persuade her to leave the priesthood, and the Native American nun Pauline Puyat (Sister Leopolda), a woman who identifies with the white settlers and Catholics rather than other Native Americans, who threatens to reveal Father Damien's identity.

Agnes describes her initial transformation into Father Damien as a religious experience, which matters because it ties her deception as disguising herself as a male priest not as sacrilege, but something that has been divinely ordained. During a flood of almost biblical proportions, Agnes is swept away from her home by the Red River. Mourning the loss of her lover Berndt Vogel, Agnes contemplates holding on to her beloved piano ("so attached was she to the instrument that she could not imagine parting from it") to follow it down to a watery grave (Erdrich 39). However, she loses her grip, is pulled away from the piano, and is washed away straight north. Instead of sinking, she is saved by her nightgown filling with air and keeping her afloat. Though she is ready and willing to die, she lives, but describes it as the death of Agnes. In a letter that Father Damien writes to the Pope which he names "Report the First – The Miracle of My Disguise," he writes, "*Blessed One, I now believe in that river, I drowned in spirit, but revived. I lost an old life but gained a new*" (41). As Deirdre Keenan points out, "even before the flood, Agnes had contemplated the 'absurd fantasy' of a new missionary life after meeting the other priest – the first Father Damien Modeste" (1). She is able to attain this through the flood, which, like a baptism where a person is cleansed from their sin and begins a new life in Christian tradition, Agnes believes her life as Agnes has ended in order for her life as Father Damien to begin. This religious experience matters because it helps to convince Agnes that this is what God wants her to do, despite it being against her beliefs as a Catholic.

Religious experiences that convince Agnes that she is divinely appointed to priesthood, despite being a woman, continue into the next section “Miracle the Second – Divine Rescue of Miss DeWitt.” After making her way to the shore, she collapses in fear and exhaustion and falls asleep. When she wakes up, she finds herself lying in bed naked and being fed soup by a man that she doesn’t initially recognize. The man crawls into bed next to her and his smell reminds her of “her human husband’s arms” (Erdrich 43). However, when she wakes from sleep again, she is in an empty hovel instead of a bed, with no sign of the man, and she realizes that she has been helped by God, the true husband that she had had previously as a nun: “For of course she knew her husband long before she met Him, long before he rescued her, long before he fed her broth and held Agnes close to Him all through that quiet night” (43). In her mind, Berndt, her “human husband,” is intertwined in her memory with God, the divine husband she knew as a nun. Yet it is this experience that begins to convince her to shed her outward appearance as a woman to become a Catholic priest. In a letter to the Pope, Father Damien writes, “*Having met him just that once, having known Him in a man’s body, how could I not love Him unto death? ... Be thou like as me, were his words, and I took them literally to mean that I should attend Him as a loving woman follows her soldier into the battle of life, dressed as He is dressed, suffering the same hardships*” (43-44). Through this passage, Agnes reveals that this spiritual experience of meeting God in the flesh makes her realize that she must literally “Be thou like as me” and be “dressed as He is dressed,” by disguising herself as male in order to be a priest to the Native Americans. Her interpretation of this encounter is further solidified when she notes the religious authority that is afforded to her as a male on the way to Little No Horse, as she could feel “an ease within her own mind she’s never felt before” (62). The feeling becomes even stronger once she sets foot on the reservation, where she becomes “certain now that she had done the right

thing. Father Damien Modeste had arrived here. The true Modeste who was supposed to arrive – none other. No one else” (65). Though she has fleeting moments of insecurity when it comes to her position as a priest, this is the beginning of her acceptance that this is the position that God wants her to be in, even if she has to pretend to be a man to do so.

I argue that it is because of her gender fluidity, not despite of it, that Agnes makes a good priest for the people of Little No Horse. This argument is further supported by the circumstances that brought Agnes to the reservation (losing Berndt, then everything else she owns in the flood, being rescued by God, then coming upon the original Father Damien’s corpse, allowing her to take on his identity). There are also a few other things that conveniently help Agnes continue to pose as Father Damien for seven decades such as the fact that though the Ojibwe recognize her as biologically female, white people do not, and when she asks God to stop her period, it does, making it easier for her to pose as a male priest for all those years.

Pretending is a big concept in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, as Agnes has to perform as a male in order to serve as a Catholic priest. Though gender is often defined as binary and thought of as the same thing as biological sex, gender theorist Judith Butler makes the argument that it’s not as simple as that. Their article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” gives some insight into the idea of gender being performative, and because gender identity is established through behavior, there is a possibility to construct different gender identities through different behaviors. Dino Felluga provides a nice summary of this article, as well as other writing that Butler has done on gender: “Judith Butler questions the belief that certain gendered behavior (what we commonly associate with femininity and masculinity) is an act of sorts, a performance, one that is imposed upon us by heterosexuality.” He goes on to say that Butler’s argument is essentially that gender doesn’t

exist “as an objective natural thing” (Felluga), pointing to the line in “Performative Acts” where they write that “gender reality is performative, which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler 527). Felluga explains this, saying that “gender according to Butler, is by no means tied to material bodily facts but is solely and completely a social construction, a fiction, one that, therefore is open to change and contestation,” and refers to “Performative Acts” again where Butler writes, “Because there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (522). This concept of gender as performance is highlighted in the novel as Agnes continues to exist in an in-between state when it comes to gender, where she moves back and forth between male/female and Father Damien/Agnes based on her need to perform as either gender in each given circumstance, rather than just her biological sex. Because gender is constructed out of behaviors, and is performed, Agnes is able to perform her duties as a male priest despite being biologically female.

Throughout the novel, Agnes never fully transforms into Father Damien, as she realizes that he is only a role that she is playing. Agnes understands that in order to *become* Father Damien, she needs to “perform” in a way that is culturally perceived as more masculine. Her first night on the reservation, she concocts a list of behaviors that she has observed that men exhibit, which she titles “Rules to Assist My Transformation,” in order to teach herself to act in a way that would make her more convincing as a male priest. However, because of her state of in-betweenness, she also maintains feminine qualities to the point that the Native Americans on the reservation recognize that she is a woman despite her attempts to appear more masculine. Erdrich also represents this in-betweenness in her language by shifting between the name

“Agnes” and “Father Damien” to refer to the priest, as well as employing both he and she pronouns, sometimes even within the same sentence. Agnes herself begins to realize that she is and always has been performing a role when she thinks back to her past names and identities, Sister Cecilia, the nun, and Agnes DeWitt, and she has a realization that “both Sister Cecilia and then Agnes were as heavily manufactured of gesture and pose as was Father Damien” (Erdrich 76). She wonders, “Between these two, where was the real self?” (76), to which the novel replies that she has been all or none of them at the same time.

Agnes never truly fits in any category, but instead adapts her gender, religion, and culture to the situation as well as her own preferences. In the article “Passing and the Performance of Gender, Race, and Class Acts: A Theoretical Framework,” Liora Moriel writes about passing, which “is defined as the movement from one identity group to another, usually from margin to mainstream” (167), a shift in identity usually along the axis of race, class, gender, and sexuality. She goes on to write:

Passing is a process that may be immediate or lifelong, one-time or over time. It can move in the direction of margin to mainstream or mainstream to margin – or back and forth – in any lifetime. Passing may be a lateral as well as a vertical move; it can be a process that may involve moving from one point to another within the margin or the mainstream while shifting identity. While some variables may lead to a desire for passing more than others – a response to danger, anger, or frustration – there is no predicting passing. The process is personal, and choices are made at every step along the continuum. (200)

Throughout the novel, Agnes is passing, however, it doesn’t begin when she first disguises herself as Father Damien. Though her transformation into the priest is the first time that she

crosses gender lines, she admits that she had also been passing as Sister Cecilia and even as Agnes to fill the role that she thought that she was supposed to fill. In this way, her life has been full of her passing as someone else. The one that she feels most comfortable in, even believing that that it was ordained by God, is when she passes as a priest. It's not being male that she cares about; that is only the means to an end. This can be shown in the way that Father Damien crosses back and forth between male priest and Agnes only posing as a male priest.

One of the things that hinders Agnes's ability to pose as a male priest are her female biological processes. To better fit into her new role, Agnes "ask[s] the Almighty, in some irritation, to stop the useless affliction of menstrual blood" (Erdrich 78), and her period stops. Despite getting what she prayed for, she describes the feeling as "an eerie rocking between genders" (79), something which impacts Agnes/Father Damien all throughout the rest of the novel. To fully transform into what she thinks she needs to be in order to appear as a Catholic priest, Agnes sacrifices a female aspect of herself to more convincingly pose as a man. It also shows that divine intervention has a part in her transformation again – by stopping her natural biological processes – further solidifying that she is meant to be a Catholic priest.

Paula Gunn Allen's book *The Sacred Hoop* provides some insight into the contrast between the European Catholic world that Agnes comes from and the Ojibwe world that she now exists in: "Under patriarchy men are given power only if they use it in a way that is congruent with the authoritarian, punitive model. The records attest, in contrast that gynocentric systems [such as in many Native American systems] distribute power evenly among men, women, and berdaches [two-spirits]" (41). Allen's discussion of major themes and issues, especially those in regard to gender, that pertain to Native Americans provides a better understanding of how gender is perceived by Native Americans and how it compares to European Christian ideas about

gender. Allen makes the point that “the Puritans particularly, but also the Catholic, Quaker, and other Christian missionaries, like their secular counterparts, could not tolerate peoples who allowed women to occupy prominent positions and decision-making capacity at every level of society” (3). While according to the patriarchal worldview of normative Catholicism and Western culture, Agnes is expected to fit into the role of a woman because of her biological sex, or into the role of a man because her outward appearance is of a Catholic priest, according to the Ojibwe worldview, her feeling of “rocking between genders” is more accepted, creating a nonbinary identity.

To give some context on gender and fluidity when it comes to gender for the Ojibwe, it is useful to look at some sources that provide insight into Ojibwe social and belief systems. Though the Ojibwe, like other Native American tribes on the plains, are considered relatively patriarchal in their social structure, Theresa S. Smith writes that, “Certainly in comparison to Western patriarchal society, the Plains tribes were not strongly patriarchal at all, and one cannot discount entirely the contention that where patriarchy existed in Native America, not only was it of a different character than Western models, but it also might have been a late (i.e., postcontact) development” (46). The trickster, “a word used to describe a type of supernatural figure that appears in the folklore of various cultures around the world” (Robinson) might give some insight into how gender fluidity is perceived in Ojibwe culture. As Amanda Robinson writes, “Often considered cultural heroes, tricksters are credited with protecting (and in some cases, creating) human life.” The trickster from Ojibwe traditions is known by the name Nanabush, and “is a half-human, half-spirit figure that appears in creation stories and is greatly respected and revered as a hero among various Anishinaabe peoples. Nanabush could change forms and often did so to play tricks on people. According to some tales, Nanabush is also described as two-spirited”

(Robinson). Similarly, J.B. Mayo, Jr. and Maia Sheppard write that “traditional Native American teaching included a more fluid and expanded conception of gender. Consequently, various Native societies created roles for all members of their communities to fill, regardless of an individual’s gender expression” (269). Citing research done by Brown, Gilley, Jacobs, Thomas and Lang, Roscoe, and Williams, they go on to say, “Those individuals, who in modern times would be called Two Spirit, performed highly respected and important spiritual, medical, and economic roles within various Native American groups” (Mayo 269). These sources help to give context as to why the Ojibwe of Little No Horse Reservation might have been more accepting of Father Damien’s gender identity than white people would have been if they had known that the priest was a woman in disguise.

Father Damien first becomes aware of the distinction between how his gender identity is actually perceived by the Ojibwe in contrast to how he expects to be perceived by other white Catholics through his Ojibwe friend Nanapush. During a game of chess, Nanapush asks him, “Why ... are you pretending to be a man priest?” (Erdrich 231). Nanapush isn’t judging Father Damien for the womanly attributes he observes in him, but there are multiple reasons why he asks Father Damien this question. Though the main reason is to catch Father Damien off guard to best him at the chess game, this conversation also reveals some of Nanapush’s and the Ojibwe’s understanding of gender identity not only in their own culture, but in a white, EuroWestern, Catholic context as well. Nanapush recognizes that though gender fluidity is accepted in his own culture, because of his proximity to Father Damien’s culture, he knows that this is not something that is accepted in white society. Ann M. Genzale argues that it is actually “Agnes/Damien[s] transgressions of religious and societal customs rather than adherence to them that bolster their religious authority within and beyond the reservation community” (29). For Nanapush, this

recognition of Father Damien's fluid gender identity helps him to respect the priest more because it distinguishes him from previous priests.

There is also evidence to suggest that though Father Damien's gender fluidity is a problem in a white, Catholic context, it might actually contribute to his eligibility for a religious position in a Native American context. In the chapter "Women-Men as 'Shamans,' Medicine Persons, and Healers," Lang talks about how in some Native American cultures, people who were nonbinary had religious and other important roles that were specific to people like them, such as being "active as healers ('shamans'), medicine men, ... conveyers of oral traditions and songs, ... they foretold the future, ... they fulfilled special functions in connection with the setting up of the central post for the Sun Dance" (151). Though Lang uses the term "woman-man" to refer to someone that is biologically a man, but chooses to present as a woman, the importance that nonbinary people served in Native American communities is still emphasized and can be applied to Father Damien/Agnes. Although these people are sometimes referred to by the name two-spirit, a term that is used for a Native American person who identifies as having both a masculine and feminine spirit, Lydia R. Cooper argues that though the idea of being two-spirit does help to reveal Ojibwe beliefs about gender, because Agnes/Father Damien is white instead of Native American, it is problematic to refer to them as that: "While it is crucial to recognize that the novel ... does more than merely require of readers that they re-center Anishinaabe conceptions of gender and sexuality ... it is also important to draw distinctions between white and Ojibwe characters' capacities to inhabit Two-Spirit identities and Euro-Western gender-variant identities" (625). Though Agnes/Father Damien does exhibit qualities that align them with the two-spirit identity, as they are not Native American, it is not appropriate to refer to them as two-spirit. However, because the Ojibwe of Little No Horse are familiar with

two-spirits, they are able to understand and accept Father Damien's gender identity, and it also sets him apart from the priests who have come before.

On the other hand, Father Damien needs to hide his identity as a woman from the other white people on the reservation and the male leaders of the church that he corresponds with because if they found out his secret, he won't be allowed to continue serving as a priest on the reservation and all of the work that he had done there will be undone: "Married couples Father Damien had joined would be sundered. Babies unbaptized and exposed to the dark powers. Deaths unblessed and sins again weighing on the poor sinners" (276). However, the fact that she is actually a woman endears her more to the Native Americans. In the case of Mary Kashpaw, it is Father Damien who rescues her from sexual abuse from a man in the community after the priest has a dream that Mary's dead parents came to him and say, "*Fetch my daughter ... for the man hurts her*" (117). Because of this, Mary becomes devoted to Father Damien, remaining a constant companion to him throughout his life. For example, after Father Damien sinks into a coma after his suicide attempt, it is Mary who guides him through the dream world and back to life. She also watches over his body in the physical realm, at which point she realizes that he is a woman in disguise, so takes steps to continue to hide this from the nuns while he is unable to do so. Finally, after Father Damien dies, it is Mary who sinks his body in the lake so his secret won't be discovered, even after death.

While Father Damien endears himself to Mary, he witnesses the divine in her as well. During the course of the Spanish influenza, many of the people on the Little No Horse Reservation die and Father Damien/Agnes feels abandoned by God:

God had brought her there under false pretenses, after all, aiding her with huge compassion in the flood's aftermath, appearing in person as a man with a horn

spoon, calm hands. Brought her there to then abandon her in battling uncanny death ... Agnes wondered, where was the Trinity? Any one of them would do, she thought in exhausted fury, God the Father, God the Son, God the Son of a Bitch, God the Holy Ghost. But her prayers, said with increasing feverish despair, did not turn back the course of the disease. (121)

It is not long after this that God does appear to the priest, this time in a feminine form, Mary Kashpaw. One day as Father Damien/Agnes and Mary are walking home through the forest during a snowstorm, “Agnes finally saw the one she had hoped for and cursed ... Agnes saw beneath the girl’s disguise. She saw that the face of her constant companion, Mary Kashpaw, was the face of the man with the horn spoon” (123). This connection between Mary and Kashpaw are solidified by two other facts: her mother named her after “the female whiteman’s god” (104) and in the accident that killed her parents, she was impaled with nails, like Jesus was during the crucifixion. Father Damien, as a priest who is also a woman, is accepted by Mary Kashpaw for his femininity and the kindness that he shows to her. In turn, Mary confirms to Father Damien that not only was it divinely ordained for him to disguise himself as a male priest to serve on the reservation, but she also shows him a God that embodies gender fluidity, just like himself.

While “Agnes adopts masculine mannerisms, assumes a priestly deference, and learns the Ojibwe culture and language” (Rader 221), her position of in-betweenness differs from the two-spirit identity, but it does count as her “passing.” As Moriel writes, passing is “a useful concept for the study of humans as makers of meanings and social categories” (174). Her blending of both religious beliefs and gender cause Agnes/Father Damien to exist in an in-between state where she is both man/woman and Catholic/Ojibwe when it comes to her spiritual beliefs. Lisa Tatonetti explains that “while Erdrich presents queer characters in many of her texts,” *The Beet*

Queen, Tales of Burning Love, and The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse “can be juxtaposed to show how the depth and breadth of her characterizations develop across the body of her work: Her texts highlight the fluidity of gender ... and later also invoke the importance of specifically indigenous, or two-spirit understandings of the range and variety of genders and sexualities” (209) at last culminating in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. This fluidity of gender, and by extension, religion, is important to the novel because it shows that Agnes/Father Damien has the ability to adapt their gender and spirituality based on the circumstance, so in the end, they differ from the other priests because, while they came to convert and control the Ojibwe, Father Damien is able to understand them and adopt their beliefs instead of imposing his own on them. It is also because of his state of in-betweenness when it comes to his gender, then later his religion, that causes the Ojibwe to accept him. However, it is because of his own understanding that gender is a construct that he is able to accept himself and his role as a priest on the reservation.

CHAPTER TWO. “IN THE SPIRIT OF THE WISE AND RIDICULOUS NANABOZHÓ”: FLEXIBILITY OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Just as gender can be seen as flexible and nonbinary, religion can be viewed in the same way. Because of the emphasis on the EuroWestern Christian viewpoint in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* and because of Erdrich’s own background as an Ojibwe Catholic, scholars frequently note the blending of Catholic and Ojibwe traditions and beliefs. However, this syncretism of two belief systems is complicated by the fact that they may initially seem to contradict each other, especially in an examination of Father Damien, who is meant to embody the Catholic worldview, and Nanapush, who is meant to embody the Ojibwe worldview. For example, though Nanapush had exposure to Catholicism because of attending a Jesuit school, he recognizes Father Damien as holy, not because Nanapush subscribes to the Catholic faith, but because he views Father Damien’s faith and gender identity through an Ojibwe lens that helps him to be more tolerant of diverse worldviews, as long as they’re not harming anyone else. For Father Damien, though he does adapt his Catholicism to fit with Ojibwe culture, by the end, he is not completely Catholic or Ojibwe, but instead is in a space in-between the two, the same way that he exists in between genders. In this chapter, I discuss how Father Damien’s belief systems change to this in-between state, the reasons for his flexible belief systems, and what that flexibility ultimately implies about his spirituality and morality.

Father Damien first comes to the Little No Horse Reservation in an in-between state when it comes to gender, but over time, he begins to exist in an in-between space as well for his religion. Erdrich examines “the possibilities and challenges of living a multilayered existence that defies dichotomous categories such as Catholic-Native; Euro-Native (American); male-female” (Rader 221-222). On the one hand, he is a devout Catholic, having served in the Catholic

Church as a nun, and now as a priest who hopes, at first, to lead the Native Americans of Little No Horse to a Christian salvation. When Agnes finds the original Father Damien drowned in the flood that she nearly drowned in, she takes it as confirmation that she should disguise herself as Father Damien to go in his place to missionize the Native Americans at Little No Horse.

However, after seven decades on the reservation, his faith begins to resemble that of the Ojibwe for several reasons. Firstly, Nanapush and the other Ojibwe accept him completely, as a priest, as a woman acting as a man, and as a friend, not because of his religion, but in spite of it. Secondly, Father Damien values what he has learned culturally about his Ojibwe community. Finally, he sees both the divine in the Ojibwe (such as when Mary Kashpaw appears as Christ to him), and recognizes the divine intervention that has sent him to the reservation, as well as the morality demonstrated by Nanapush, who follows Ojibwe tradition, and how Sister Leopolda, who though Ojibwe, follows Catholicism, and cruelly uses her religion to harm those around her. Towards the end of his life, Father Damien writes in a letter to the Pope that “*The ordinary as well as esoteric forms of worship engaged in by the Ojibwe are sound, even compatible with the teaching of Christ*” (Erdrich 49) and when Sister Leopolda threatens to expose that he is in fact a woman, he worries that if he had to leave, “there would surely be no one who would listen to the sins of the Anishinaabeg and forgive them – at least not as a mirthless trained puppet of the dogma, but in the spirit of the ridiculous and wise Nanabozho” (Erdrich 276). The thought process behind these words indicates the shift in how he has begun to view Ojibwe beliefs as well as his own Catholic beliefs. He understands that what the Ojibwe people needs isn’t more abstract Catholic dogma, but a spirituality influenced by their own culture and beliefs, something that he ultimately realizes that he himself needs as well. This distinguishes him from previous

priests because he is able to make that adjustment, while also aligning himself with the valued trickster of Ojibwe tradition.

When Father Damien is dying, it isn't Catholic heaven that he hopes to enter, but "the heaven of the Ojibwe" (Erdrich 346). This is important because it demonstrates that in the end, it is the Ojibwe people and their beliefs that he chooses because of their acceptance of him, his respect of them, and the morality that he sees in them and their beliefs versus the harm that he has seen Catholicism cause the Native Americans. Throughout his life on the reservation, there were several people who knew his sex. While he was told that he couldn't be a priest by his lover, Father Gregory, and Sister Leopolda, both Catholics, the Ojibwe people accepted his fluid identity because though it was something out of the ordinary, or even sacrilege for the Catholics, the Ojibwe recognized and respected gender fluid people. Because of their acceptance of him, it is his Ojibwe friends that he hopes to see when he dies and it is their heaven that he wants to go to, which demonstrates his flexibility when it comes to his religious beliefs. As his identity throughout the novel shifts between the female Agnes and the male Father Damien, so do his religious beliefs shift between a Catholic priest with the goal of converting the Ojibwe, and a religious leader, who though still a Catholic priest, disregards conversion to Catholicism and instead embraces the adoption of Ojibwe spiritual beliefs into Catholicism. However, before Agnes became Father Damien, she had a different religious identity as the nun, Sister Cecilia.

As a nun, Agnes DeWitt, who at that time was known as Sister Cecilia, found religious connection in music: "At the piano keyboard, absorbed into the notes that rose beneath her hands, she existed in her essence, a manifestation of compelling sound" (Erdrich 14). Unique from the other nuns of the convent (and a foreshadowing for how Father Damien is different from other reservation priests), Sister Cecilia sees herself as more than just a nun because of her

deep connection to her music, a connection that is so spiritual, she becomes “a manifestation” of the music. She is so moved by the music because she recognizes something beautiful and profound in it. Even the other nuns acknowledge something special in the way that Sister Cecilia plays music, and are disturbed by their own emotional reactions to her playing, as well as how her music reminds them of the world outside of the convent. The connection that Sister Cecilia feels when playing music reaches its peak one day when she is playing Chopin, and she “experience[s] a peaceful wave of oneness in which she entered pure communion ... such was her innocence that she didn’t know she was experiencing a sexual climax, but believed rather that what she felt was the natural outcome of this particular nocturne played to the utmost of her skills – and so it came to be” (15). In her naivety, she believes her orgasm to be spiritual in nature, however, the other nuns understand the sensuality in the music and try to prevent her from using the piano. But because Sister Cecilia is unable to let go of Chopin, “she made a true genuflection, murmured an act of contrition ... and the music, her music, which the Mother Superior would keep from then on under lock and key as capable of mayhem” (17) and leaves the convent.

Agnes, leaving behind her identity as Sister Cecilia as well as the convent, ends up in the barn of the farmer Berndt Vogel, with her hair shorn and her breasts bound. The two become lovers, but Berndt is unable to convince Agnes to marry him. Annette Van Dyke describes the relationship between the two as “Erdrich begin[ning] her story of the unpredictable Agnes with a kind of passionate chess game between her and Berndt” (64). Agnes’s unpredictability even before her arrival at Little No Horse makes her ideal for shifting identities and her state of in-betweenness throughout the novel. Agnes, who chooses to leave the convent because she realizes that she can’t be faithful to both her vows and Chopin, also refuses to marry Berndt because she

has already pledged herself to God. This serves as foreshadowing to the significant chess game that Father Damien and Nanapush play later where Nanapush reveals that he knows that Father Damien is actually a woman. However, unlike Berndt, Nanapush is able to best Agnes and win the game by being tricky himself. In this way, there is a parallel created between Nanapush's cunning nature as well as Agnes's unpredictability, aligning her with the trickster of Ojibwe belief, more so than Catholic saints and religious leaders and again demonstrating her fluidity.

Erdrich draws upon biblical references in many of her works, including *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. For example, she labels the chapter about Agnes's transformation into Father Damien as "The Transfiguration of Agnes," in reference to the transfiguration of Jesus, where his appearance changed to reveal his divinity. The flood that nearly drowns her alludes to the great flood from Genesis that covered the earth completely in water and drowned everyone except Noah and his family. Finally, her baptism into a new life after coming out of the river following the flood reflects the religious rite of full immersion into the water, which symbolizes rebirth. Though written before the publication of *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Catherine Rainwater writes in "Reading Between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich" that though Erdrich has encoded biblical references in her works, she uses them alongside encoded references from Native American shamanic tradition, such as water and snakes. Not only this, but often the two traditions contradict each other when it comes to the significance of the symbolism. For example, though water is seen as purifying and as a renewing of life (such as with baptism) in Catholicism, drowning in Ojibwe belief prevents entrance into the spiritual world. Snakes in Catholicism are associated with the devil and the temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden (Pruitt), but the Ojibwe believe that there is a great snake at the center of the earth that holds everything together (Erdrich 220). Rainwater

refers to this juxtaposition as “conflicting cultural codes in which the reader must respond” (407). However, Brian Ingrassia refutes Rainwater’s essay on spirituality in Louise Erdrich’s novels (now including *The Last Report* in the conversation), arguing that though Rainwater is correct in asserting that Erdrich presents Ojibwe and Catholic beliefs as conflicting cultural codes, Erdrich does not treat the two beliefs as equal, but instead that she “in fact does ‘endorse one theological view [Ojibwe] over the other [Catholicism]’” (314). In reference to “Erdrich’s use of Catholic and biblical symbolism,” Ingrassia claims that it serves as “an example of this kind of hybridity in which Christianity is not only ‘appropriated’ but also ‘abrogated,’ that is negated and repudiated” (320). However, as P. Jane Hafen explains, “While Father Damien certainly comes to believe and to validate aspects of Ojibwe spirituality, he is not ‘converted’ in the traditional Christian sense of the giving up one faith for another, he becomes part of an integrated worldview that accommodates multiple spiritual experiences” (83). Furthermore, though there is a chance that she will accomplish what she came to do by converting the Native Americans of Little No Horse Reservation, Van Dyke says that Agnes, as a woman, “becomes the ultimate outsider by assuming the role of a priest and thus, she is in a location ‘to see’ things differently, and without the arrogance that a white man would bring to the position” (65). Ultimately, instead of prioritizing one religion over the other, or even claiming their equality, Erdrich creates in Agnes/Father Damien, a character who is comfortable in a position that combines both religious traditions in a way that is unique to them as an individual and that also parallels their gender identity.

In letters to the Pope, Agnes shares how she came to disguise herself as a man to take the place of the original Father Damien. The letters are almost like a confession in that they allow Agnes to share her whole story, even the parts that would make her ineligible for priesthood.

Having survived drowning in the Red River flood, there is a clear parallel to baptism when she says, “*I now believe in that river I drowned in spirit, but revived*” (Erdrich 41). However, the near-drowning is also significant for Ojibwe beliefs, because as Rainwater points out, “drowning prevents the victim’s entry into the spirit world” (“Ethnic Signs” 149). This matters, because by avoiding drowning, Agnes is caught in another in-between space between life and death. As Van Dyke writes, “Agnes has entered and exited the spirit world and taken on a new guise rather than being stuck between worlds” (65). This also connects Agnes back to the trickster, because as Robinson writes, “another key defining feature of tricksters is that they wander, spiritually and physically. They often travel between the spirit world and the tangible world, as well as the areas in-between (Robinson). Tying this to the title of this section (“The Transfiguration of Agnes”) and Christian beliefs, Agnes, like Jesus, is resurrected and transformed to reveal a more divine nature, meaning that she now resembles the savior of the Catholic faith, as well as the trickster of Ojibwe belief.

Agnes’s belief that she has been divinely appointed to her position of priesthood is also justified in the narration of her finding the original Father Damien drowned after the flood. In “The Exchange,” Agnes “came upon poor Father Damien Modeste, whom she freely admitted she disliked even as she pitied him now” (Erdrich 44). As she digs a grave for him, “the certainty grew” (44) that she was meant to replace the original Father Damien in his mission to convert the Native Americans of Little No Horse Reservation. In reference to the title, Agnes exchanges their clothes, and by extension, their identities:

Her heavy nightgown was his shroud. His clothing, his cassock, and the small bundle tangled about him, a traveler’s pouch tied underneath all else, Agnes put on in the exact order he had worn them. A small sharp knife in that traveler’s

pocket was her barber's scissors – she trimmed off her hair and then she buried it with him as though, even this pitiable, he was the keeper of her old life. (44)

Searching for higher purpose in life after suffering tragedy, she returns to the Catholic religion that she had known as a nun, only now as a disguised priest. Ludmila Martanovschi explains that by “slipping into his identity,” Agnes is able to find “the urge to press on in her attempt to flee her recent past full of pain, confusion, and lack of perspective” (50). After the loss of her lover Berndt and her ability to play music, her life feels meaningless, but she remembers being envious of the original Father Damien when he told her that he was going to be a priest on the reservation. However, she finds that “there was nothing to hold her back, now, from living the way she had dreamed of in the hot dark of her loss” (Erdrich 45). As she did when she left the convent as Sister Cecilia, Agnes – now Father Damien – takes control of her destiny and transforms herself. As the narrator says, “the moon bobbed up in a cool blur to show her way, and then, under its light, Agnes began to walk north, into the land of the Ojibwe, to the place on the reservation where he had told her he was bound” (45) with plans for a new purpose in life where she will follow her religious convictions to convert the Ojibwe of Little No Horse.

Agnes, despite knowing very little about the Ojibwe other than that they “were an agreeable people not known for their ferocious instincts, even in the past” (38), decides to go the reservation anyway. In 1996, nearing the end of his life, Father Damien, who has gained a profound knowledge of the Ojibwe and their culture after seven decades of living among them, writes in a letter to the Vatican, “*I have learned something of the formidable language of my people, and translated catechism as well as specific teachings. I have also rendered into English certain points of their own philosophy that illuminate the precious being of the Holy Ghost*” (49). Now referring to them as “my people,” Father Damien has not only learned their language during

his time counseling them, but also has attempted to reconcile their spiritual beliefs with Catholicism in order to give their culture and religion credibility in the eyes of the Catholic Church. In this way, Father Damien helps to bridge the gap between the two extremes that he encounters when he first comes to the reservation, with the Native Americans who reject Christianity because of the harm that it has brought to their community and the Catholic nuns stationed on the reservation, who, without attempting to understand the harm that they may cause by doing so, attempt to convert the locals. On the journey to the reservation, Kashpaw says to Father Damien, “Leave us full-bloods alone, let us be with our Nanabozho, our sweats and shake tents, our grand medicines and bundles. We don’t hurt nobody. Your wiisaakodewiniwag, half-burnt wood, they can use your God as backup to these things. Our world is already whipped apart by the white man. Why do you black gowns care if we pray to your God?” (63) Though Kashpaw patiently takes the time to explain all of this to Agnes in the moment, it is the Father Damien of 1996 who is relating this story and truly understands all of the things that Kashpaw has said, having devoted his life to the Ojibwe. Because of this, we learn that “half-burnt wood referred to half-breed people,” Nanabozho was “a god, a story figure,” and the “sweats and the shake tents were houses where Ojibwe ceremonies took place” (63-64). Instead of being like the other Catholics on the reservation and the previous “black gowns,” Father Damien not only attempts to understand and accept the Ojibwe spiritual beliefs, but also starts to believe that they are compatible with Catholic beliefs.

Conversion is a major aspect of Catholicism that Father Damien wrestles with throughout *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. Horne explains that “Agnes, when she first adopts the role of Father Damien, comes to the reservation, ‘to civilize’ the Anishinaabe” (279), especially by means of religious conversion. However, as Cooper points out, “Once Damien

begins to identify with his chosen Ojibwe family, he begins to question his own religious tradition's insistence on conversion" (635). Wrestling with his own understanding of his faith, Father Damien "prayed, uneasily, for the conversion of Nanapush, then prayed for his own enlightenment in case converting Nanapush was a mistake" (Erdrich 182). Despite conversion being emphasized in his religion, it matters that Father Damien prays for enlightenment on the issue because it shows the beginning of his doubt about conversion of the Native Americans being the ultimate goal. In this moment, he realizes that converting Nanapush would take away his friend's independence, especially considering that Nanapush would only convert to Catholicism if he was forced, not because it was his own decision. Regardless of his eventual dismissal of his mission of conversion, Father Damien still remains a Catholic priest who continues to lean on his Christian faith.

Agnes's transformation into Father Damien is not only represented through the use of shifting pronouns, but also through religion in the form of transubstantiation. Upon meeting the nuns of the reservation, Agnes begins her responsibility as a priest by leading Mass. When she begins, "Agnes tried to control the shaking and keep her voice low, but her tongue was thick with cold despair" (67), however, when she is able to successfully recite the words, her pronouns switch to he: "He crossed his breast five times ... and the bread was flesh ... the wine was blood" (68). Agnes finds herself wondering, "Was this something that happened, always, to priests? Did their part of the sacrament transubstantiate in real as well as metaphorical terms?" (69) Just as the bread becomes meat and the wine becomes blood in Father Damien's mouth, Agnes becomes Father Damien and a real priest. Two important aspects of Catholicism are addressed here: first of all, during transubstantiation, the belief is that Catholics partake in the literal body and blood of Christ, and secondly, that Mass is performed by a male priest, so when

the bread and wine literally turns into flesh and blood for Agnes, it symbolizes in a way that is religiously significant that she is meant for her role as a priest, despite being biologically female.

As I discussed in the first chapter, in the next scene, Agnes prays that her menstrual cycle will stop. She asks “the Almighty, in some irritation, to stop the useless affliction of menstrual blood” because she believes that if she doesn’t need to worry about getting her period, she can “more confidently pursue the work cut out for an active priest” (78). By losing an aspect of herself that would make it harder for her to pose as a man and by doing so through prayer, Agnes’s identity as a priest is further confirmed as her divine right. It is immediately following this biological transformation that Father Damien meets Nanapush and Fleur, two people who end up having a huge impact on his religious transformation. Nanapush especially becomes a close friend to Father Damien, as well as a mentor when it comes to learning the Ojibwe culture. Both Nanapush and Fleur also become like family to Agnes, especially when she holds Fleur’s baby Lulu for the first time and “she was overcome with strange contentment, not maternal so much as fully human ... she became a connected being” (184). While adopting aspects of Ojibwe spiritual beliefs into her religion, Agnes “simply found herself related” to Nanapush, his wife Margaret, Fleur, and Lulu, adopting them as her new family as well. However, despite the relationship built between Father Damien and Nanapush’s family, Father Damien fails to save their land from John James Mauser when they come to him with “papers that transferred the land belonging to Fleur Pillager and to Nanapush himself into the hands of the lumber company” (185). Because of the spiritual significance of the land to Nanapush and his people, Damien’s failure to protect the land of his adopted family results in spiritual consequences for the priest.

The divine consequences that Father Damien faces begins with an interaction with the devil, who appears to him as a black dog and tells Father Damien that he has come to take Lulu.

When Father Damien offers himself as a sacrifice to replace Lulu, he is sent his first trial, which in a Christian context, means that he faces a hardship that tests his faith. This trial comes to him in the form of Father Gregory Wekkle. From the start, Agnes is drawn to the handsome young priest, and despite her hesitancy to reveal her identity to anyone, she and Gregory are drawn together one night alone in their room. Upon Gregory's discovery that Father Damien is a woman, they begin a sexual relationship. Throughout their relationship, Agnes struggles through the temptation of whether she should give up her life as a priest, leave the reservation, and marry Gregory, or if she should remain faithful to the people of Little No Horse Reservation as well as to God. After finally deciding to send Gregory away, and falling into a deep depression, it is Mary Kashpaw and Nanapush who give her the strength to go on, and she ponders that "her salvation [was] composed of the very great and very small" and God "comforted her in a language other than her own" (216). Furthermore, by giving up Gregory, and therefore overcoming the trial that the devil had sent for her, the gift of playing music that Agnes had lost is returned to her because of her obedience to what appears to be her divine calling. She uses this ability to perform another miracle by drawing snakes into the temple with her playing of the piano. Snakes are a prevalent symbol throughout the novel and are relevant because in a Christian context, they are associated with the creature in the Garden of Eden who tempted Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit. In this novel, snakes take on a different meaning. Following this event, Nanapush tells Father Damien that "this was a great sign of positive concern among the old people, for the snake was a deeply intelligent secretive being, and knew all the cold and blessed spirits who lived under stone and deep in the earth. And it was the great snake, wrapped around the center of the earth, who kept things from flying apart" (Erdrich 220). Megan Milota writes, "Damien's lulling of the snakes with his piano is ... seen as evidence of his guardian

spirit or totem animal” (479) and as a result of this event, “Damien was gratified to find that he was consulted more often and trusted with intimate knowledge” (Erdrich 220). Father Damien’s connection with these highly revered creatures gains him the respect of the Ojibwe. For Nanapush, this event helps to spark his interest in the priest, and Father Damien observes that it seems to make the Ojibwe trust him even more. Another example of the snake being used alongside Catholicism is when Father Damien commissions a statue of the Virgin Mary for the church and when she arrives, Sister Hildegard objects to keeping her because the “snake that writhed beneath the Virgin’s feet not only was too realistic, but did not look at all crushed down by her weight” (226). The snake can also be used as a parallel to the Ojibwe in this instance as “among the Anishinabe tribes, snakes are seen as dangerous but also powerful, and they have been considered one of the major spirit animals of the Midewiwin medicine society” (“Native American Snake”), which “is a spiritual society found historically among the Algonquian of the Upper Great Lakes (Anishinaabe), northern prairies and eastern subarctic” (Gadacz). In other words, instead of the Catholic Church and colonialism (represented by the Virgin Mary) crushing the Native Americans (represented by the snake), their beliefs, culture, and everything else that makes up their worldview, the statue gives the impression that the Native Americans cannot be crushed by colonialism and instead will endure, despite oppression.

Because of the connection to the saints which Alison A. Chapman talks about in her analysis of the novel, most scholarship has focused on Father Damien’s similarity to trans saints like St. Marina, St. Pelagia, St. Eugenia, St. Susanna, and St. Theodora, connecting Father Damien/Agnes to the Catholic faith. Deirdre Keenan acknowledges that two spirits were commonly seen as mediators, a role that Father Damien takes up in order to reconcile Catholic and Ojibwe spiritual beliefs. Keenan writes that “Father Damien’s mediation reveals the limits of

Christian orthodoxy, the recuperative potential of Ojibwe spirituality, and the possibility of a spirituality that arises from two traditions” (9). This mediation between spiritualities also influences his understanding of language and relationships, to the point that when Father Jude asks him about scandals he has heard about on the reservation, Father Damien replies, “I prefer to call such incidents ... profound exchanges of human love” (Erdrich 134). He goes on to say, “The Ojibwe word for the human vagina is derived from the word for earth. A profound connection, don’t you think?” (134). Father Jude, shocked by what he considers Father Damien’s lack of moral judgement, questions the older priest about if he “condone[s] such irregular behavior,” to which Father Damien replies that rather than condoning or not condoning their behavior, he “cherish[es] such occurrences, or help[s] his charges to, at least” (134). Because of his role as mediator in this novel, Father Damien rejects Father Jude’s Catholic inspired idea of morality, and instead, looks at it through an Ojibwe inspired lens, which doesn’t adhere to such strict binaries of right and wrong. As Keenan writes, “Life as a priest among the Ojibwe and his proficiency in Anishinaabemowen has fundamentally restructured Damien’s sense of reality, wherein truth is subjective, matters of right and wrong are always gray, and the only real, immoral actions are those that hurt others” (9).

Perhaps Father Damien is also sympathetic when it comes to what is considered sexual immorality by Father Jude because of his own past sexual experiences. When he was the nun Sister Cecilia, she experienced an orgasm while playing Chopin on the piano: “One day, exquisite agony built and released, built higher, released more forcefully until slow heat spread between her fingers, up her arms, stung at the points of her bound breasts and then shot straight down” (Erdrich 14-15). After leaving the convent, Cecilia (now Agnes), moves in with Berndt Vogel and they become lovers. When Berndt dies and Agnes takes on the original Father

Damien's identity as a priest on the reservation, she has one last sexual relationship with Father Gregory Wekkle. Because of his own life experiences with love and sex and his understanding that there is often ambiguity in all things – whether it be gender, spiritual beliefs, or morality – Father Damien cannot fault other people for having a similar viewpoint.

While Father Jude had originally come to the reservation to investigate Sister Leopolda's life for possible canonization, he eventually finds that he is unable to support her claim to sainthood because "he was having trouble with passion, from the Latin *pati*, to suffer, defined in the Catholic dictionary as *a written account of the sufferings and death of one who laid down his life for the faith*" (336). Having heard conflicting reports about Leopolda, many of which painted her as a cruel and sadistic woman, Father Jude finds that he cannot justify her behavior and begins to consider how Father Damien might fit the role of a saint instead. Upon reflecting on the qualities of a saint, he finds that "the life of Father Damien also included miracles and direct shows of God's love, gifts of the spirit, humorous incidents as well as tragic encounters and examples of heroic virtue. Sainthood, thought Jude almost idly, then caught himself in wonder. Sainthood? Father Damien? Am I writing the wrong Saint's Passion?" (341). Despite the revelations that Father Damien has had about morality in his religion and the ambiguity found in life, as well as his acceptance of Ojibwe spirituality in his own beliefs, Father Jude begins to consider him to be what a true saint should look like – virtuous and full of love for others. As Milota writes, "If Damien's passion is what makes him a candidate for sainthood, Erdrich makes it clear that anyone is capable of such experiences, regardless of their religious affiliation" (482).

Ultimately, Father Damien/Agnes's relationship with religion is as flexible as their relationship with gender. Though Father Damien has been compared to Catholic saints throughout scholarship and is ultimately considered a candidate for sainthood, his relationship

and close connection with Nanapush, Nanapush's clear parallel to the trickster god of the same name from Ojibwe belief, and Father Damien's adoption of Ojibwe beliefs into his religion also aligns the Catholic priest with Ojibwe spirituality. Erdrich, because she doesn't prioritize one religion over the other or claim their equality, creates Father Damien/Agnes as a character who is comfortable in the in-between space when it comes to religion. Kindness and understanding are meant to be the foundations of religion in any culture, and Father Damien embodies these attributes in the way that he treats the Ojibwe of Little No Horse, while also realizing that both Catholicism and Ojibwe spiritual beliefs are important to his own faith. Though Father Damien originally comes to the reservation to convert the Native Americans there, by the end, he not only accepts the Ojibwe spiritual beliefs and sees them as compatible with Catholic beliefs, but he also begins to integrate them into his own belief system.

CHAPTER THREE. “A MOST LOVING FORM OF DESTRUCTION”: CRITICISM OF SETTLER COLONIALISM AND CATHOLIC CONVERSION

Though gender and religion are both important themes in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, the novel also acts as a criticism of the effects of settler colonialism, especially that which had been enacted by the Catholic Church on Native Americans. Settler colonialism is defined as “a distinct type of colonialism that functions through the replacement of indigenous populations with an invasive settler society that, over time, develops a distinctive identity and sovereignty” (“Settler”). There are three ways that settler colonialism can be distinguished from other kinds of colonialism: “First, settler colonizers ‘come to stay’ ... second, settler colonial invasion is a structure, not an event ... third, settler colonialism seeks its own end” (“Settler”). The Catholic Church, though not the only perpetrators in the United States, did play a huge part in settler colonialism against the Native Americans. William S. Cossen writes that the Catholic Church has a “record of actively participating in the federal government’s conquest and colonization of Native Americans and the West, part of the church’s effort in the 19th and 20th centuries to gain mainstream acceptance in America.” Furthermore, “numerous bishops and priests partnered with federal officials and their Protestant rivals in a shared project of forced assimilation of indigenous people, participating in family separations and involuntary placement of Native American children in boarding schools where abuses regularly occurred” (Cossen). Because of the history of the Catholic Church’s role in settler colonialism in the U.S., Agnes, who was first a nun, then a priest, acts as a colonizer in the beginning of the novel. Colonialism shapes her worldview because she believes that it is her purpose to become a priest and convert the Native Americans of Little No Horse to Catholicism, however, by being more fluid in her gender and by occupying a social space that would have been closed to her as a

woman, she inadvertently embodies Native American tradition, which eventually serves to help bond Agnes with the Ojibwe, a relationship where they see her as an equal instead of a colonizer.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Native Americans were forced to adhere to American hegemony, which began to erase tribal identity. For example, Hemenway says that:

Native languages slowly gave way to English. Mandatory American boarding schools forbade native languages to be spoken. Children, alienated from their families, began to lose their languages and their cultures during their stay at these institutions. Unable to perform ceremonies and traditions in native tongues, a slow loss of tradition and identity became inevitable.

Because the Ojibwe have experienced these results of settler colonialism, the Ojibwe in Erdrich's novel do not trust Catholic priests. The Ojibwe's distaste for previous Catholic priests as well as Catholicism as a whole is no secret. When Fleur first meets Father Damien, Erdrich writes, "She hated priests. The priests had brought the sickness long ago in the hems of their black gowns, in their sleeves, in the water they flung on people to make them holy but which might as well have burned holes in their skins" (Erdrich 81). In a story that Nanapush tells Father Damien when they first meet, he references how the Ojibwe trickster Nanaabozho – another name for Nanapush ("Native American Legends") – is given supplies by a French fur trader, including poisoned fat. Nanaabozho tells a wolf to gather as many foxes and wolves as he can and Nanaabozho shares a sermon with the animals that if they eat the fat, they will gain eternal life. In a clear parallel to communion, he gives them the fat, and as they consume it, Nanaabozho proclaims, "Long may you live!" before they fall down dead. When Nanaabozho returns to the trader with the skins of the dead animals, he says, "Truly ... I have converted them – to money" (Erdrich 85).

Shackleton comments on this story, saying that "Nanaabozho is the priest and the foxes and the

wolves are the gullible Indian congregation” (79). This story reflects the distrust between Native Americans and Catholicism because though the Catholic Church promises them “eternal life” found through conversion to Christianity, it, like the fat in the story, is poisoning them and destroying their culture and traditions. The conversion to money aspect also points to how religious conversion has not been the only motivation behind colonization in the United States, but money and power has been as well as “historians generally recognize three motives for European exploration and colonization in the New World: God, gold, and glory” (“Motivation”).

In a reversal of events, when the priest falls into despair after his relationship with Father Gregory ends, it is Nanapush who helps to pull him out of his suicidal thoughts and creates a traditional and spiritual experience by inviting him into the sweat lodge to “reconcile the priest’s divided self ... Here, surrounded by Ojibwe men, Damien finds peace” (Keenan 8). Nanapush initially expressed disgust for the way that Indigenous people had been treated under the colonizing force of the Catholic Church, yet he is the one who heals Father Damien by allowing him to take part in a ceremony that holds spiritual significance for the Ojibwe. This demonstrates that Nanapush no longer sees Father Damien as a colonizing force like the previous priests, but as a friend. Connecting this to Father Damien’s gender fluidity and the fact that Nanapush and many of the other Ojibwe know that he is a woman disguised as a man from the very beginning, Father Damien’s “inclusion in an exclusively male ceremony shows that the Ojibwe men identify and accept Damien’s Two Spirit status” (Keenan 8). While this identity is something that Father Damien has had to hide from other white people, despite feeling that it is divinely ordained for him to be a priest, the Ojibwe accept his gender identity, not despite of their culture and spiritual beliefs, but because of it.

Andrea Smith emphasizes that disempowering women, especially Indigenous women, is a key component of settler colonialism because “in order to colonize a people whose society was not hierarchal; colonizers must first naturalize hierarchy through instituting patriarchy. Patriarchal gender violence is the process by which colonizers inscribe hierarchy and domination on the bodies of the colonized” (23). For example, this institution of patriarchal hierarchy that has affected Indigenous communities, such as the Ojibwe community in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, impacts how Nanapush and other Native Americans perceive Agnes as a priest. Though Agnes is not Indigenous, she experiences firsthand the way settler colonialism disempowers women. Agnes believes that it is her divine right to be a priest, and though she fulfills her role as a priest well, when Father Gregory learns that she’s a woman, he tells her that she is “sacrilege” (Erdrich 207). In part because of her confidence that she is meant to be a priest despite being a biological woman, Agnes comes to understand that gender is a construct of society, and “her identification as ‘woman’ is no more *natural* than her forged identity as Father Damien” (Keenan 5). Because of Agnes’s shifting between genders, she embodies the fluidity of gender found in Native American tradition, rather than the Western gender binary. Even though she initially comes to the reservation with the mindset of colonialism through her mission of conversion of the Ojibwe to Catholicism, she is unique from previous priests, first of all, because of her gender identity. Because she is eventually able to recognize the flaws in her own culture (such as how it perceives gender fluidity) and doesn’t want to impose that on the Ojibwe, she shifts away from her previous position of colonialism. In this way, Agnes, posing as Father Damien, is less of a colonizer because she does not seek to impose her own will, beliefs, and customs on the Ojibwe as the other priests before her did.

At first, Father Damien enacts colonialism because of his association with the Catholic Church and his goal to convert the Ojibwe. Towards the end of his life, Father Damien begins to understand the destruction that Christianity (and by extension, settler colonialism) has had on the Ojibwe, saying to Father Jude that “it all goes back to conversion, Father, a most ticklish concept and a most loving form of destruction” (Erdrich 55). Father Damien had seen the way that conversion and the forcing of Catholicism on the Ojibwe could devastate their lives. For example, he reflects on how early decisions that he made affected Mary Kashpaw: he convinced Kashpaw, Mary’s father, that he needed to cleave to one wife and family, and abandon the rest in order to adhere to church doctrine; Quill, Mary’s mother and the wife that Kashpaw chooses “whose mind was sensitive” (100) is devastated that her sister, another one of Kashpaw’s wives, is sent away, and clings to Catholicism. It is because of Quill’s and Kashpaw’s conversion that they are on the wagon with the Virgin Mary statue when the horses are spooked by Sister Leopolda, causing an accident which results in the death of Kashpaw and Quill, and leaves Mary horribly wounded. Now an orphan, Mary is taken in by her mother’s cousin Bernadette Morrisey and is raped by Bernadette’s brother, Napoleon (117). Though this is just one example of how Father Damien has seen the devastating domino effect of conversion on the reservation, he understands that Catholic conversion, though it may seem loving at first, may cause more destruction in the end.

When Father Damien goes off to die alone, he leaves his Catholic faith behind: “There is no one I want to visit except in the Ojibwe heaven, and so at this late age I’m going to convert . . . and become at long last the pagan that I always was at heart” (310). This is significant for several reasons. One, Father Damien has had to hide his gender variance throughout his life from the Catholic Church, while finding acceptance from the Ojibwe. Two, he has built relationships with

the Ojibwe throughout his lifetime and wants to see his friends Nanapush and Fleur when he dies. Three, he has seen the detrimental effects of conversion to Catholicism for people such as Mary Kashpaw. When writing about this scene, Keenan says that he “ultimately ... personally rejects Christian dogma, including its concepts of evil and redemption, choosing, in the end, to enter the Ojibwe heaven” (9). Things that Father Damien had once thought of as “evil” such as having multiple wives because of Catholic doctrine’s opposition to plural marriage, was made worse when as a Catholic priest and an outsider with a mindset of colonialism, he ended up causing more devastation with his interference into such matters. However, he takes this understanding a step further and “subverts the conversion process by inverting it, transforming and aligning his own belief system with Chippewa ways” (Rader 226). Though Father Damien originally was a colonizer that came to convert the Ojibwe of Little No Horse reservation, over his lifetime, he realizes that convincing them to convert would destroy their culture and who they are, and would likely cause a domino effect of devastation that he has seen in the lives of both Mary Kashpaw, who lost her whole family and was abused as a result of conversion/settler colonization, and Sister Leopolda, who chose to reject her Ojibwe background and embrace Catholicism, only to become a cruel murderer set on destroying everything about her culture. Despite his own part in colonization at the beginning of his vocation on the reservation, his heart is softened by the fact that not only do the Ojibwe take notice of his gender variance and reject gendered power structures of the Catholics, but also accept it and him as a person, even inviting him into their sacred places and treating him like family. His understanding of the negative effects of conversion to Catholicism and settler colonialism is so profound that he chooses conversion himself before he dies, rejecting his Catholic faith and embracing Ojibwe beliefs just as the Ojibwe embraced him for who he was.

Agnes dedicates herself to the community and earns the trust and respect of the Ojibwe. This shared respect between Father Damien and the Ojibwe is observed by Father Jude in the way that Father Damien has learned the language and the culture of the Ojibwe: “Ojibwe words and phrases had crept into Father Damien’s waking speech and now sometimes he lapsed into the tongue, especially in his frequent confusion over whom he was addressing” (51). Cooper writes that Father Jude suggests “that Damien’s connection to his community was prescient rather than un-priestly: ‘He [Damien] had learned the language of the Ojibwe,’ Jude thinks, ‘even before Vatican II’ (341)” (637). Father Damien’s respect for the Ojibwe and their culture throughout his life paves the way for his eventual (at least partial) rejection of the conversion aspect of colonialism, evidenced in the name of this section of the novel (“The Deadly Conversions”) and Father Damien wrestling with the problem of whether or not Nanapush should convert to Catholicism.

However, though Father Damien’s dedication to the Ojibwe language and culture are admired by Father Jude, his rejection of the mission to convert the Ojibwe does not automatically show rejection of the Catholic Church, especially since Father Damien is specifically a Jesuit priest. As Cooper notes, Father Damien’s “connection to his community was prescient rather than un-priestly” (637), pointing to the observation that Father Jude makes that “He [Father Damien] had learned the language of the Ojibwe ... even before Vatican II” (Erdrich 341), a reference to how “the Society of Jesus ... evolved during the years of the narrative [of *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*] (1910-96) from an organization that emphasized education *and conversion* to a post-Vatican II, socially progressive version of itself that *de-emphasizes* conversion, instead acknowledging that active conversion is incompatible with justice in non-Catholic communities” (Cooper 636-637). To explain this further, Peter-Hans

Kolvenbach, S.J., former superior general of the Society of Jesus, describes the post-Vatican II Jesuit commitment: “Faithful to the Vatican Council, the Congregation wanted our preaching and teaching not to proselytize, not to impose our religion on others, but rather to propose Jesus and his message of God’s Kingdom in a spirit of love to everyone” (4). Therefore, though Father Damien eventually refuses to convert the people of Little No Horse, this viewpoint still allows him to be consistent with the contemporary Jesuit view on conversion.

Much like the Catholic Church’s view on conversion, it’s view on gender (such as its emphasis on gender as binary and being male-exclusive) hasn’t been consistent either. According to Gary Macy, during the Middle Ages, women had “presided over ceremonies during which they distributed the bread and wine consecrated during the communion ritual” (3) and “the history of Christianity is replete with references to the ordination of women” (4). As Cooper writes, “the early church perceived gender in distinctly nonmodern ways” such as that “masculinity was the performative embodiment of the state and, with the rise of Christianity, of the church ... but gender was perceived as performative rather than biologically innate” (637). Cooper goes on to say that “one of the strangest (to modern sensibilities) examples of this distinction lies in the martyrdom of Saint Perpetua, recorded in one of the only first-person accounts of a woman martyr” because “in the moment of her martyrdom – a moment in which, through her courage and holiness, she comes to embody Christian virtue – she is transformed into a man” (637). In *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Father Damien follows early church tradition through her gender fluidity while rejecting modern Western concepts of gender, as well as embodying the two-spirit identity that the Ojibwe are familiar with that associates her with holiness.

Cooper writes that despite this attempted transformation out of colonialism, “Father Damien’s vocation remains Catholic – albeit a moderated form of Catholicism that eschews ‘deadly’ conversion and embraces an openhearted celebration of Ojibwe cultural-kinship social structures and religious orientation toward the world” (641). As she goes on to say, “the distinction matters because conversion is, as Nanapush’s story about Nanabozho and the wolves indicates, an intrinsically violent act” (Cooper 641). Though the story of Nanabozho convincing the wolves to eat poisoned fat to gain eternal life is originally told to illustrate the dangers of conversion of the Native Americans to Christianity, it works the other way as well, because to convert Father Damien, as a Catholic priest, completely away from Catholicism would pose the same danger to his religious worldview. Catholicism is part of his identity and it’s as important to him as the Ojibwe’s culture and traditions are to them. Though he does convert to being a “pagan” (Erdrich 310) as he puts it, before death, he still tries to sink his body in the river to prevent it ever being found because he knows that his legacy as a Catholic priest will be tainted if he’s found to be biologically female. Even after his death, he is still connected to Catholicism as the Catholic Church begins to consider him for a nomination of sainthood. Cooper argues that “Erdrich’s novel demands a type of reading that is careful to identify Father Damien as a priest: he is not Two-Spirit, although Nanapush’s description of his relationship with wishkob people opens space for Damien to learn to accept his own inhabitation of his vocation” (641). In reading *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* and the character of Father Damien, we need to be careful to not commit colonialism ourselves in our analysis by referring to Father Damien, a white person, as two-spirit, an identity reserved for Indigenous individuals. Furthermore, the syncretism of Father Damien’s faith “helps Agnes/Father Damien not only to form a powerful bond with the Ojibwe but also to act on her/his religious calling in ways that could not be

possible in a narrower interpretation of Catholic doctrine” (Genzale 30). However, in the end, Father Damien is still a priest.

Throughout the novel, Agnes embraces the colonial mindset when it comes to her religion and mission of conversion, and while not intentional, she also rejects the Western view of gender that has been culturally imposed on her because she realizes that gender is a construct. The Ojibwe not only notice her gender fluidity, but accept it, and her as a whole person. Over time, Agnes’s view of the Ojibwe’s culture and beliefs influences her opinion of them, and realizing the flaws in her own belief system and seeing the positives in their belief system, she decides that it is not right to convert them. Ultimately, Agnes is the one who converts from a position of being a colonizer whose ultimate goal is to convert the Ojibwe, to a position of acceptance of variant beliefs, including in herself.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on his life at the end of *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Father Damien writes, then burns these words: “*Time at last to end the long siege of deception that has become so intensely ordinary and is, now, almost as incredible to me as it will be to those who find me, providing I let that happen*” (Erdrich 342). Father Damien knows that if he allows his body to be found, his legacy will be tainted by the fact that he is a biological woman, a secret that could be discovered once he was dead. Though he has lived in an in-between state when it comes to gender his whole time on the reservation, he understands that after death, he will only be remembered as a woman who was deceptive and disguised herself as a priest, rather than the kind and caring priest that he actually was, who devoted his life to the Ojibwe of Little No Horse Reservation. There is also still the fear that if his true identity is discovered, all of the work that he has done on the reservation will be undone. Yet while Father Damien’s gender identity is important in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* and for his interactions with the Ojibwe, his flexibility of religion and culture is also significant. After his death, Mary Kashpaw, showing her devotion to him, hides his body in the water. Because of this, his secret is never discovered, and he is considered for sainthood. However, just as he exists in-between genders, he does the same in his religion, gaining significance as a Catholic saint, but also as a saint to the Ojibwe, the people who he was actually devoted to as a priest rather than the Catholic Church. This is because Father Damien had realized over the course of his life that gender was a construct, he was meant to be a priest – in fact, divinely appointed to the position – despite being a woman, and that while the Catholic Church would have turned against him because of this fact if they had known, the Ojibwe accepted him as he was, even going so far as to protect his secret after death.

My analysis of *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* using Allen's discourse about Native American feminism and Butler's argument about gender being performative focuses on the discussion around gender being a construct and the necessary fluidity of religion. Both of these theorists are helpful in looking at how Father Damien is able to construct an identity for himself, first when it comes to his gender, but then later for his religious and cultural identity. Allen's book that focuses on the role that women and gender fluid persons had in Native American society and how that was changed by settler colonialism aligns with Erdrich's novel by giving some context as to why the Ojibwe of Little No Horse accepts Father Damien's gender fluidity. Butler's essay about gender being a performance relates to Father Damien being able to successfully convince the other white Catholics on the reservation that he is a male, which allows him to serve as a priest there for seven decades.

Agnes, who takes on the societal role of a man by posing as a Catholic priest throughout her life, challenges the gender norms of Western culture and the Catholic Church. By adopting Ojibwe beliefs into her own belief system, Agnes also challenges the religious and cultural boundaries. The Ojibwe recognize her as a "man-acting woman" (Erdrich 232), and Agnes receives acceptance on the reservation that she wouldn't likely receive from Western culture or the Catholic Church for her subversion of established gender roles. This acceptance, which Agnes begins to see as an aspect of the Ojibwe's morality and respect, also influences her eventual conversion to a faith that resembles the Ojibwe's belief system more so than the Catholic belief system. Father Damien also provides a religious approach that isn't influenced by the need for the Ojibwe to convert, but focuses instead on morality and forgiveness. Because he chooses to forgive "in the spirit of the ridiculous and wise Nanabozho" rather than "as a mirthless trained puppet of the dogma" (276), he is able to connect with the Ojibwe in a way that

previous priests on the reservation were never able to do. This directly influences the fact that most of the Native Americans on the reservation accept him as a religious leader. However, despite the belief that Agnes holds that even though as a biological woman, she has been divinely appointed to priesthood, Gregory Wekkle, who represents the Catholic Church, Catholicism, and EuroWestern ideas of gender, and Sister Leopolda, who as an Ojibwe who converts to Catholicism, represents the effects of settler colonialism on Native Americans, do not accept her as a male priest. Though Agnes has fleeting moments of insecurity when it comes to being a priest, she accepts that her role is divinely appointed by God, which influences her continued deception of posing as a man.

In *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Erdrich also connects Father Damien to earlier historical ideas of gender in Western culture. For example, Cooper writes that “prior to the eugenics movements of the nineteenth century that sought to codify ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ social roles as genetically innate in a body’s sex, European conceptions of gender were more closely associated with social roles, relative power, and structural hierarchies than with sex itself” (639-640). Therefore, along with Father Damien viewing gender as a construct, he as “a female-assigned male priest finds his way toward his vocation through ecstatic spirituality and through the gaze of an Ojibwe elder who shares a worldview in which having multiple gendered spirits is a common attribute of holiness” (640-641). While Agnes shows that gender is a construct by successfully posing as Father Damien for seven decades, her gender fluidity is not a new concept for the Native Americans, but it’s not new in EuroWestern culture either. According to Lang, “reports are encountered over and over again concerning persons in Europe (see Dekker and Van de Pol 1990; Green 1974:7ff.) and in the United States (Katz 1985) who lived successfully in the social role of the opposite sex, and who frequently went

unrecognized for a long time” (3-6). Despite evidence that people have been successful in living as the opposite sex, and that women have even been ordained as priests (see Macy), the debate about if women or gender fluid persons should be able to serve as priests is a continued debate in the Catholic Church. As John Norton writes in his 2003 article “Vatican Says ‘Sex-Change’ Operation Does Not Change Person’s Gender,” “After years of study, the Vatican’s doctrinal congregation has sent church leaders a confidential document concluding that ‘sex-change’ procedures do not change a person’s gender in the eyes of the church.” Norton goes on to write, “Given church teaching that only males can be validly ordained priests, the question posed in newspapers at the time was whether a priest who undergoes a ‘sex-change’ operation remains a priest – the answer is ‘yes’ – and whether a woman who undergoes the procedure can be ordained – ‘no.’” In June of 2019, the Vatican released a document titled “Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education,” which is “its first extensive statement on transgender identity” (Horgos). In this document, “the Vatican ... flatly rejected what it cast as the notion that individuals can choose their gender ... as Western countries are increasingly wrestling with the social and legal implications of more fluid definitions of identity” (Horowitz). With so many debates about what constitutes gender in contemporary times, especially within the Catholic Church, looking to history can help us see how the definition and performance of gender has been fluid and changing.

The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, by focusing on a EuroWestern character in a Native American context, helps to show the ambiguities primarily, though not exclusively, when it comes to gender identity and religious belief systems. Father Damien, though only a literary character, is able to share his story in Erdrich’s novel to give perspective about gender fluid/nonbinary people and how religion should support people of all identities.

Erdrich is ultimately able to show that a broader understanding of one aspect of identity (such as gender), can lead to a more complex understanding of other aspects of identity as well, such as religion and culture.

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