Stories of Pain, Stories of Healing:
Confronting the Violences Against Women in Louise Erdrich’s
The Round House

Liandra Skenandore, English
Dr. Kyle Bladow, Native American Studies
Northland College

Introduction

I write this paper with a spirit of inclusivity and consideration of all the relations crafted in Louise Erdrich’s National Book Award winning novel The Round House. I employ an Indigenous feminist literary framework that centers the stories of the book’s diverse women characters, since their stories describe their truths about the various gendered violences they have either survived or perished from. At times throughout this essay I pluralize the word “violence” to “violences.” I acknowledge that this is a typically nonstandard pluralization of the word, yet for the purpose of this analysis I use the word “violences” as a linguistic strategy to bring close attention to the fact that there are all kinds of violence that the characters in the novel contend with. Though the book is largely a first-person narrative, written from the perspective of thirteen-year-old Joe Coutts, this focalization does not limit the carefully, empathetically crafted lives of these diverse women characters who live on the North Dakota Ojibwe reservation with Joe, nor does it obstruct what their stories have to tell about their experiences with the modern injuries of settler colonialism and colonial heteropatriarchy.

The rape of Indigenous women is a central topic in the novel. Joe’s mother, Geraldine, survives a heinous rape committed by Linden Lark, yet the case goes unprosecuted by Ojibwe tribal, North Dakota state, and federal authorities because of legal loopholes and failings as revealed throughout the novel. Beyond the novel, Erdrich gives great consideration and concern about jurisdictional trouble and sexual violence against Indigenous women in her New York Times article “Rape on the Reservation,” reporting that “one in three Native women is raped over her lifetime, while other sources report that many Native women are too demoralized to report rape.” Erdrich notes the limitations of the law for tribal courts, advocating that in order “to protect Native women, tribal authorities must be able to apprehend, charge and try rapists--regardless of race. Tribal courts had such jurisdiction until 1978, when the Supreme Court ruled that they did not have inherent jurisdiction to try non-Indians without specific authorization from Congress” (“Rape”). The novel highlights this point by making Geraldine’s rapist, Linden Lark, a non-Indigenous individual who escapes prosecution because of these legal loopholes. Linden even remarks in the novel “I won’t get caught… I’ve been boning up on law” (161). This injustice, which plagues and breaks Joe as he and his family are pushed to deal with the failings of tribal, state, and federal law, compels adolescent Joe to obtain justice for his mother on his own morally gray terms by murdering Linden.

Much of the scholarship written about Erdrich’s novel analyzes these tragedies. Laura Roldán Sevillano examines perpetrator trauma and justice conflict; Thomas Matchie, in his
article “Law versus Love in The Round House” argues that love drives Joe to take revenge; Julie Tharp contends that the novel is politically charged and through Joe’s narrative renders apparent the countless sexual violences that Indigenous women suffer on reservations; Tereza M. Szeghi makes a case for Erdrich’s literature as didactic and activist for collective human rights; and Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz negotiates traumatic memories with traditional and modern sources of law and justice. These studies have highlighted the significance of the law failing the Coutts family in receiving justice, forcing Joe to obtain it on his own; however, much remains to be discussed regarding the multiple forms of violence against women the novel also describes, which also go unpunished. The scholarship underplays the complexity of the violence multiple women face in the story and the effects these violences have.

While the novel explores the intimate and devastating effects the sexual violence against Geraldine has on her community and especially her family, Erdrich has subtly yet meticulously created diverse women characters who struggle to escape other forms of violences against them. Sonja, Joe’s aunt and herself a non-Indigenous woman, experiences domestic abuse from Whitey, Joe’s uncle. Sonja’s story broadens the gender justice concerns presented in the novel and her character is particularly enlightening because she is vocal about the injustices she suffers, whereas Geraldine is sadly silenced for the majority of the book. Sonja’s words inform and teach Joe and readers the ripple effects of domestic violence as well as its recurring nature of brutality and entrapment. The character Linda Wishkob, a non-Indigenous woman adopted into an Indigenous family who is also Joe’s family friend and the twin sister of Linden Lark, endures verbal abuse and emotional manipulation, both being often overlooked forms of violence, at the hand of Linden and her birth mother, Grace Lark. Through Linda’s story, Joe and readers are exposed to the non-physical cruelties that still damage and affect an individual. Finally, Mayla Wolfskin’s character and her story, the events of which motivate the attack on Geraldine, reveal the frightening reality of missing and murdered Indigenous women. Erdrich’s novel therefore engages with multiple violences against women, uncovering the moral and judicial failures for protecting women’s safety, security, and sanity. The novel details the destructive effects these violences have on families and communities, and, worsomely, how these violations alter children when their minds are overwhelmed by profuse varieties of assault, as exhibited in Joe’s character. The novel explores the legacies of violence women experience and the kinds of violence that they are forced to contend with and brave: from verbal assault to murder.

My Indigenous feminist literary framework addresses these violences and centers these diverse women and their stories as critical to the reckoning of the extensive, severe effects of ongoing settler colonialism, colonial heteropatriarchy and its gendered violences and injustices. I include Geraldine, Sonja, Linda, and Mayla, who are a mixed group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous women, because, purposefully or not, Erdrich’s novel has given voice to multiple women from diverse backgrounds who are hurting. Putting these characters together, the narrative advances the importance of inclusivity and highlights the significance of solidarity. Through an Indigenous feminist literary lens, I include and recognize these multiple forms of violence against women as severe social injustices demanding attention and discussion if we are to break the cycles of colonial heteropatriarchy and upset the logics of settler colonialism. Indigenous feminist critique is apt for this analysis because of its inherent inclusivity, its emphasis on community and considerations of all relations, and its imperative, foundational notion of supporting and communicating a shared humanity that cultivates union amongst diverse backgrounds in order to resist and reject malevolent forces. Indigenous
feminism has been criticized and disregarded as a framework because critics contend that it is too exclusive and it is *only* for Indigenous women and communities. But as an Oneida/Potawatomi/Seminole/Creek woman myself, I maintain a spirit of inclusivity because I cannot ignore the other violences against women described in Erdrich’s novel. Violence against *any* and *all* women *is* and *should* be intolerable to Indigenous feminism. Tharp calls the book “Erdrich’s crusade against rape” but little has been said about the solidarity that also define’s “Erdrich’s crusade.” My analysis of *The Round House* is not meant to subvert the trouble of sexual violence against Indigenous women as presented in the novel, nor to negate the important work of autonomous Indigenous feminist work by and for Indigenous women; rather, the purpose of this essay and my Indigenous feminist framework is to take seriously for Indigenous feminism’s calls for diversity, inclusivity, and solidarity in storytelling, in discerning truths from stories, and in the overall effort to address violence against women so as to combat gendered oppression and build healthier futures.

Though I argue that Erdrich’s novel is largely a book about violence and stories of pain, it is also subtly about healing and moving away from violence and pain, especially through stories and storytelling, when there is no recourse or justice from the systems of law. Scholar and writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) teaches us that “storytelling is at its core decolonizing, because it is a process of remembering, visioning and creating a just reality… Storytelling then becomes a lens through which we can envision our way out of cognitive imperialism, where we can create models and mirrors where none existed, and where we can experience the spaces of freedom and justice” (33). Erdrich’s women characters enact these ideas through the stories they tell which are embedded in Joe’s larger narration and which grant him and readers valuable knowledge. Storytelling is not just a recounting of violence; it is not just an act that manages, even covers, the malaise of life; and it does not just serve as testimony for judicial proceedings and records. Instead, storytelling is an act of healing that deliberately engages with the mind so as to achieve meaning, recovery, and mobility. Simpson insists that decolonization must be rooted in alternatives to violent settler patriarchal logics. These alternatives are found in stories, both personal attestations and traditional stories, e.g. the Akiikwe tale told to Joe by his grandfather, Mooshum, which introduce theories of mobility and healing for those experiencing the failings and inadequacies of modern legal processes. Therefore, centering women and their stories and listening to what they have to say, upsets and may even break the brutal cycles of gendered violence because their truths voice refusal and survival. Their stories teach life theories of mobility and healing that exist and must be valued outside of the law and its philosophies.

It is significant that Erdrich voices social justice concerns for both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous women. Professor and scholar Cheryl Suzack (Batchewana First Nation) writes in her formative book *Indigenous Women’s Writing and the Cultural Study of Law* that Indigenous women writers unmask “legal realities concerning historical injustice” (9). Certainly Erdrich is troubled by the historical injustices against Indigenous women. Yet as a writer she reminds us that she is also witness to the violences and injustices that permeate Indigenous homelands, and she articulates a moral imperative to address these transgressions that shatter children, families, and communities. Oftentimes approbations lauding Indigenous resiliency, or “survivance” as Gerald Vizenor would say, follow discussions about violence in Indigenous communities. Scholar Mary Paniccia Carden eloquently recognizes the enduring quality of Ojibwe tribal culture and sovereignty in her essay “‘The Unkillable Mother’: Sovereignty and
Survivance in Louise Erdrich’s *The Round House.*” Carden writes that Erdrich “uses Lark’s rape of Geraldine to highlight Ojibwe resilience and resistance. She presents Geraldine’s story as a parable not just about endurance but about survivance” (110). While Carden presents an apt analysis, I would emphasize that resiliency still does not excuse the atrocities and violences against Indigenous women, nor against non-Indigenous women. Women should not be forced to contend with these injustices and then be rewarded with being described as resilient. Rather, we should listen to their stories, hear the knowledge they have to give, and help them the best we can so that they may not experience violence again. Therefore, my Indigenous feminist literary analysis of Erdrich’s novel centers the stories and truths of not only Geraldine, but also Sonja, Linda, and Mayla in order to address and confront these violences against women so that we may learn to break the harmful cycles and logics of settler colonialism and colonial heteropatriarchy and build collective, balanced futures.

**A Devastated Home and Broken Innocence**

*The Round House* is a painful coming-of-age story for Joe. The book is set in the summer of 1988 on a North Dakota Ojibwe reservation. Joe recounts his traumatic memory of his mother, Geraldine becoming the victim of a heinous rape which goes unprosecuted. Erdrich is renowned for the incredibly diverse communities she creates and maps in her fiction as well as the complex character relationships and tensions she crafts, as seen since the publication of her first book *Love Medicine* (1984) and reminiscent of Gabriel García Márquez's Buendía family (without the incest--perhaps they could have benefitted from clan systems). Such a network of characters furthermore live in settings as richly imagined as Márquez's Macondo or William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County. *The Round House* is no different in this regard because even though it depends on a monovocal narrative structure to understand the traumatic ripple effects of violence, a variety of voices, stories, and truths are still present, which builds the liveliness of the North Dakota Ojibwe reservation community. Some of Erdrich’s characters from her preceding novel *The Plague of Doves* (2008) are revisited, including Mooshum, Bazil Coutts--Joe’s father and tribal judge--and Geraldine, now Bazil’s wife. Unlike *House Made of Dawn* by N. Scott Momaday or *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko, which are momentous novels in the Indigenous literary canon, detailing the process and experience of homecoming, in *The Round House* there is no return to the reservation but rather an account of what happens on the reservation. Erdrich engages with a specific dilemma of the individual: what happens when home, traditionally a place of safety that houses a sense of normalcy, is disturbed by outside malevolent forces and becomes a prison of agony and frustration. Yet each of these works by Momaday, Silko, and Erdrich articulates issues of violence affecting the individual, the community, and expresses the grief and healing that comes from fighting the trauma, silence, and attempted erasure.

The beginning of Erdrich’s novel portrays a united and arguably healthy Ojibwe family. Bazil Coutts is a successful tribal judge and Geraldine is a respected specialist at the tribal enrollment office, leaving Joe free to enjoy an adolescence full of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and camaraderie with his friends Cappy (or Virgil Lafourmais), Zack Peace, and Agnus Kashpaw. There are no apparent struggles or existential pain that the family or its individual members wrestle with. Joe recognizes that he has “always had the perfect family--loving, rich by reservation standards, stable--the family you would never run away from” (96). Love is emphasized at the very start, specifically the love and reverence that Joe and Bazil have for Geraldine. “Women don’t realize,” says Joe, talking about his mother, “how much store men
set on the regularity of their habits. We absorb their comings and goings into our bodies, their rhythms into our bones. Our pulse is set to theirs” (3). Geraldine’s influence and vital presence shapes Joe’s adolescent world, and herein Erdrich establishes the centrality of women in the novel, presenting them as significant human beings who hold the world together and whose wellness measures the health of world. Yet this role is challenged when Bazil and Joe, depicted working together at the beginning of the novel in the family garden, realize the peculiarity of Geraldine’s absence on page 3. Bazil questions Joe, “where is your mother?” and this query disrupts the evening events for the two of them because her absence unsettles time and unbalances their sense of home. Their world is not together, and both Joe and Bazil sense this fact so deeply that they instinctively decide to seek out Geraldine: “‘Let’s go find her, [Bazil] said. And even then as I threw on my jacket, I was glad that he was so definite--find her, not just look for her, not search. We would go out and find her” (3). Joe and Bazil indeed find Geraldine but they also discover the pained, mangled state she is in and eventually come to understand the violence that she has just experienced, which shatters their world and leaves them all devastated and changed forever.

Since Erdrich situates Joe’s relationships at the center of the novel, specifically those centered around women who contribute greatly to the constellation of Joe’s community, this makes it apparent how the effects of violences harm individuals, families, and communities. It is important to note that because the novel relies on Joe’s narration, we as readers must also rely on Joe to listen to the women that surround him if we are to hear their stories and listen to their truths. The first violence we and Joe are introduced to is the rape of Geraldine. The consequences of this attack are immediate because Joe sees the intense, shaking state his mother is in once they find her and he confides to us, “I was scared she would fly apart” (7). Once Bazil and Joe bring Geraldine to the hospital, Joe is told that he must stay in the waiting room. While he waits, readers gain a greater knowledge of how Joe centers and values Geraldine’s existence and the vitalness of her wellness: “My mother was a beautiful woman--that’s something I always knew. A given among family, among strangers… Calm and direct, with take-charge eyes and movie-star lips. When overcome with laughter [she] lost all dignity, however, and choked, snorted, burped, wheezed, even farted… Even then, [she was] beautiful” (10). Joe also talks about his Aunt Clemence in this scene, and we learn the significance that women’s laughter has for the well-being of Joe and his family, and his home. Yet the novel opens with no women laughing and this proves to be not only unsettling for Joe, but unnatural. The ripple effects of Geraldine’s rape touch and patently trouble Joe: “Nobody else, not Clemence, not even my mother herself, cared as much as we did about my mother. Nobody else thought night and day of her. Nobody else knew what was happening to her. Nobody else was as desperate as the two us, my father and I, to get our life back. To return to the Before” (109-10). Joe’s innocence is shattered as he learns what rape is and he becomes enraged, expressing a violent reaction and thereby showing how violence inspires one to feel fear and become violent themselves: “I wanted to know that whoever had attacked my mother would be found, punished, and killed. My father saw this. His fingers bit into my shoulders. We’ll get him, I said quickly. I was fearful as I said this, dizzy. Yes” (12). However, attaining justice for Geraldine proves to be a fruitless legal fight because her rape occurred at the round house on the reservation, a sacred site and a place where justice exists, as articulated in the Akiikwe story (discussed in more detail below), but in the novel the round house is juxtaposed as the place where Geraldine’s rape happens.
Geraldine cannot remember exactly where her rape took place at the round house because she tells Bazil that Linden “kept a sack on me. And he raped me. Somewhere” (159). The location is imperative to know since “three classes of land meet there… tribal trust, state, and fee” (160) and, as Erdrich reported in her *New York Times* article at the beginning of this essay, tribe’s only have power of jurisdiction over tribal lands and tribal members. Tribe’s are unable to try non-tribal individuals who commit crimes on their lands without proper authorization from Congress. Even if Geraldine’s case could make it to the courtroom, the novel reveals an upsetting, disturbing reality: “The problem with most Indian rape cases was that even after there was an indictment the U.S. attorney often declined to take the case to trial for one reason or another” (41). If U.S. attorneys can refuse such desperate cases, no one cannot help but wonder if the American legal system operates under a sentiment similar to Linden’s when he remarks of his decision to rape Geraldine, “I suppose I am one of those people who just hates Indians generally” (161). In her groundbreaking study *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America*, Sarah Deer stresses that “rape is deeply embedded in colonizing and genocidal policies” (111). “The power of women’s sexuality,” writes Deer, “because of its potential to affect reproduction and identity, is often a target of those seeking to destroy a people” (112). Linden echoes this attitude of Indigenous eradication and tribal disempowerment as well as disenfranchisement, given that, as Deer writes, “the damage done to [tribal] sovereignty today is done largely through rape” (97). Linden is not ashamed to admit that he hates Indigenous people and Indigenous women to extent that he studies the law so he can rape, colonize, and destroy with impunity both her body and her tribe’s body and their humanity. Geraldine’s case goes unprosecuted, and Linden ultimately evades punishment because of these judicial and moral failings.

Joe, at this point, is launched into the reality of sexual violence against Indigenous women, and readers are witnesses with him to this transgression. Notable reviewer Michiko Kakutani remarks that Joe is “initiated into the sadnesses and disillusionments of grown-up life and the somber realities of his people’s history” (Kakutani). Yet these sadnesses and disillusionments also pertain to the tragedies and truths of reservation life. They unveil the legacies of injustices against Indigenous women, that threaten the Indigenous female existence, bringing light to issues, limitations, and frustrations between federal and tribal legal entities in exercising a tribe’s sovereignty, power of jurisdiction, and ability to protect tribal members. Such injustices further demonstrate how the sadisms of settler colonialism and colonial heteropatriarchy humiliate, dehumanize, and harm entire generations. Beyond this sudden overwhelming awareness of rape, Joe is ruthlessly catapulted into the world of gendered violence as the rape of Geraldine opens his eyes to the multiple violences against other women in his family and community.

“I contracted an infection of the spirit”: Addressing Verbal Abuse and Emotional Manipulation in Linda Wishkob’s Story

Stories are instruments of truth-telling, and there are multiple stories described in the novel that offer truths about violences against women, such as Linda Wishkob’s story. Linda is a critical yet overlooked character in the novel. She helps Joe destroy evidence of Linden’s murder at the end. Even though she is non-Indigenous, Linda is an appreciated community member of the North Dakota Ojibwe reservation, adopted in by the Wishkob family, and respected and recognized by Bazil as well as many others. Despite Joe describing her as “magnetically ugly”
Bazil reminds him that “she’s been through the wringer enough, for real” and ugliness does not warrant ignoring her (110-11). Erdrich crafts space for Linda’s story and shifts the narrative to her voice, in which she articulates her experience with verbal abuse and humiliation from the Larks, specifically her twin brother, Linden. It is significant that Joe listens to what Linda has to say even though he is repulsed by her congenital deformity: “I went past pop eyes and sinister porcupine hands and wispy hair and just saw Linda, and wanted to know about her, which is probably why she told me [her story]” (115). Linda is given space and time to speak her story and she voices her truths about the “wringer” she has endured and survived.

From Linda’s story we discern her experience with abuse and how it affected her. The United States Department of Health and Human Services Office on Women’s Health (OWH) names emotional manipulation and verbal abuse as a violence against women. The cite mentions that insults and humiliation qualify as a form of abuse (womenshealth.gov). In Linda’s story we learn that her twin, Linden, needs a kidney transplant. Yet as we witness the interaction between Linda and Linden, who has effectively abandoned her until this transplant need arose, the pervasiveness of Linden’s abusive character is given greater detail in a different context than with Geraldine: “I don’t want your kidney,” says Linden. “I have an aversion to ugly people. I don’t want a piece of you inside me. I’d rather get on a list. Frankly, you’re kind of a disgusting woman” (125). The word “disgusting” stands out as an intolerable insult and humiliation that my Indigenous feminist literary critique rejects as ever acceptable. Upon enduring this insult and humiliating moment, Linda confesses “I might not be a raving beauty queen… but nobody’s ever told me I’m disgusting” (125). Linden has taken advantage of Linda’s congenital deformity and used it as an excuse to insult and humiliate her. He continues to subvert her humanity and remarks “you probably have a cat… Cats pretend to love whoever feeds them. I doubt you could get a husband, or whatever, unless you put a bag on your head. And even then it would have to come off at night. Oh dear, I’m sorry. [Linden] put his fingers on his mouth and looked slyly guilty. He gave his face a mock slap” (125). Not only does Linden falsely apologize for his insults, he ridicules Linda with a twisted sense of rebuke. The effects of this are paralyzing for Linda because as she attempts to escape the room that confines her with Linden she says, “I tried to get away from him, to get to the door, but instead I backed up against the wall and was stuck there in that white, white room” (126). Linden’s insults and humiliating comments, classified as forms of verbal abuse and therefore as a form of violence against women, renders Linda immobile and he limits her humanity to that of only an “ugly” and “disgusting” person, ultimately depriving her of being recognized and seen as a real human being.

Linda voices her truth about abuse from Linden and these truths are extended to her experience of being emotionally manipulated by him as well. Emotional manipulation is also named as a form of abuse by OWH. Linda ends up following through with the kidney transplant procedure for Linden, a request asked of her by her birth mother Grace Lark who also effectively abandoned Linda until this need arose, and when asked by Bazil why she followed through, Linda responds, “she wanted it. Mrs. Lark. The mother. By the time the whole procedure was settled, I abhorred Linden--that’s the word. Abhorred! But he cozied up to me. Plus, it was ridiculous because now I felt guilty about hating him… he gave me presents, flowers, fancy scarves, soaps, sentimental cards. He told me how sorry he was when he was mean, temporarily charmed me, made me laugh” (126). Linden’s behavior towards Linda after the procedure is starkly different than before, yet it is still in line with manipulative behavior because as Dr. Harriet B. Braiker brings attention to in her 2004 book-length study on manipulation, Who’s
Pulling Your Strings?: How to Break the Cycle of Manipulation and Regain Control of Your Life, forms of positive reinforcement are used as ways to control victims. The gifts from Linden to Linda are his way of controlling the situation and further subverting her because she is manipulated into thinking that she is at fault and he is innocent. The effects of Linda’s experiences with Linden’s abuse are manifested physically for her: “And after that… I became very ill. Yes, said my father… You contracted a bacterial infection from the hospital and were sent to Fargo. I contracted an infection of the spirit, said Linda precisely, in a correcting tone” (126-27). The ills of Linden’s verbal abuse and emotional manipulation towards Linda, a form of violence against women, eventually made her ill.

Joe and Bazil, and also readers, hear and listen to Linda’s story. The power of her voice states her truth about abuse and survival. Linda’s story teaches us about the non-physical wounds that also define violence. My Indigenous feminist literary framework includes Linda’s story in the discussion about violence against women and colonial heteropatriarchy because listening to Linda’s words helps us understand the dehumanizing and devaluing effects said patriarchy has on not only Indigenous women, but on non-Indigenous women as well. The ramifications of colonial heteropatriarchal attitudes sicken these women. From Linda’s story, Joe and readers realize verbal abuse and emotional manipulation as a form of violence against women that has consequential effects that we must not ignore if we are to break these harmful patriarchal logics.

Breaking the Silence: Geraldine’s Story of Surviving Rape

A transformative moment of the novel occurs when Geraldine finally breaks her silence and shares her story of surviving rape, speaking of savage truths. Joe and Bazil are again present to hear and listen to Geraldine’s story, as they were for Linda’s. As Geraldine recounts her story, Joe, Bazil, and we as readers are given deeper truths to the brutality and reality of rape. Since much of the scholarship already focuses on this specific tragedy, my inclusion of Geraldine’s story will primarily focus on what her story teaches us about rape as a severe injustice and as a form of violence against women.

To return to her important work, Sarah Deer forces us to question why rape is wrong, asking, “What sane, rational person would even consider this a matter for debate?” (109). Yet Erdrich and other Indigenous women writers continuously confront us with this issue and demand that society address this injustice. Marcie Rendon (Ojibwe, Eagle Clan) powerfully conveys the effects of this atrocity against women in her poem “this woman that i am becoming”: “Sister / the rape of a woman / is the rape of the earth / the rape of a child / the rape of the universe” (A Gathering, 219-20). This poem, just like the novel, describes the significant ripple effects that happen after this abominable crime. The violence disrupts and destroys the balance of the earth and the well-being of present children and future generations. Further dismaying, the violation is so disturbing that it unsettles the stars. Rendon’s poem reminds us that harm from rape is at once both excruciatingly individual and incredibly extensive because a woman’s life is an ever-connected web of sons, daughters, friends, spouses, and communities for whom the disruption of a single thread threatens the entire nexus. Deer emphasizes and builds upon this understanding by categorically stating that “rape is wrong because a perpetrator attacks a woman or child at her core identity as a human being. Rapists treat victims with disregard and disrespect by committing violent, terrifying, humiliating attacks. But rape is also an attack on the
community” (109). Certainly, we witness in *The Round House* how rape is an attack on community, especially family.

Perhaps the most stunning element to Geraldine telling her story is her saying how she escaped and ultimately survived the violence. It is imperative that we discuss the rape itself and its consequences so that we may break its cycle, which is rooted in ongoing settler colonialism. Scholars like Tharp and Carden pay close attention to this endeavor. Yet I would argue that it is equally important to highlight the survival of Geraldine, which rejects the destructive force of Linden’s attempted colonization of her body and destruction of her community. Recounting her rape at the round house, Geraldine says “while [Linden] had his back turned and was pouring the gas on Mayla, I grabbed his pants and put them between my legs and I urinated on them, that’s what I did. I did! Because I’d seen him light his cigarette and put the matches back into his pocket. I was surprised that didn’t notice that the pants were wet with urine, but he was absorbed in what he meant to do” (162). This ingenious act ultimately saves Geraldine and Mayla, for when Linden attempts to set fire to the two of them, “he couldn’t start the fire with matches from his pants pocket” (162). Linden says, “I have another book of matches, a lighter even, down the hill” and when he goes to retrieve these items, Geraldine finds the courage and power to move and flee the scene where she is able to be rescued by Bazil and Joe as depicted at the beginning of the novel.

The fact that Geraldine speaks her story and truth grants us significant knowledge about how severe an injustice rape actually is. She has survived her rape, and she is able to tell what happened. Geraldine breaks her silence and speaks of the violence that was meant to destroy her. Joy Harjo writes in the introduction to *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language*, an anthology of North American Native women’s contemporary writing, “to speak at whatever the cost, it to become empowered rather than victimized by destruction” (Harjo and Bird 22). Whether Geraldine is conscious of it or not, her speaking has empowered herself and also her community. Joe and Bazil listen to her story and Geraldine carves space for her voice and truth. Her ability to speak inherently rejects the settler colonial logic of dehumanizing Indigenous women. Geraldine’s voice powers against Linden and his actions and thereby refuses his destruction and the attempt to erase her. Though she has indeed survived, we must not forget to remember why rape is wrong so that we may end its epidemic and ensure the safety and humanity of women.

**Sonja’s Story: Domestic Abuse and its Recurring Violence**

The next story I center in my analysis is Sonja’s. Joe and we as readers have learned about verbal abuse, emotional manipulation, and rape as forms of violence against women. As stated earlier, Joe is launched into the reality of gendered violence and becomes increasingly aware of the injustices women who surround him are forced to contend with by listening to their stories, and we are also listeners and witnesses with him. Erdrich broadens her gender justice concerns with the creation of Sonja’s character, herself a non-Indigenous woman and girlfriend of Joe’s uncle Whitey, and her story, which voices the harsh truths about domestic abuse and its cyclic violence and entrapment.

This time without the presence of Bazil, Joe realizes that Sonja is physically abused by Whitey. Scholar Tereza M. Szeghi mentions this case of domestic abuse in her article “Literary Didacticism and Collective Human Rights in US Borderlands: Ana Castillo’s *The Guardians* and
Louise Erdrich’s *The Round House.*” Szeghi writes that Joe is “surrounded by examples of male aggression toward women (not just by Lark against Geraldine but also by his domestically abusive Uncle Whitey)” (418). However, this is the extent of consideration that Szeghi gives to Sonja as a woman character contending with violence and injustice against her. Other scholars like Thomas Matchie, Julie Tharp, Laura Roldán Sevillano, Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz, and Mary Paniccia Carden omit recognition of Sonja’s experience with domestic abuse altogether. This absence is unacceptable for my Indigenous feminist literary analysis because in the spirit of inclusivity and solidarity we must confront all the violences against women presented in the novel which I argue is part of Erdrich’s larger crusade against gendered violence and its various forms. Therefore I center her story so that we may be able to hear her truths and gain knowledge about why domestic abuse is a severe injustice against women.

Joe is an actual witness to Sonja’s violence, whereas for Linda and Geraldine’s stories he listened to their experiences with violence. Uncle Whitey drunkenly accuses Sonja of cheating and Sonja cries, “There’s no he. It’s just you, baby. Lemme go” (175). Joe then hears “the crack of a slap” and “a cry” (175). The effects of this violence cause Joe to react violently, just like his reaction to Geraldine’s rape: “My blood pulsed and swam. The poison that was wasting in me thrilled along my nerves. I thought I’d kill Whitey. I was not afraid… I punched him in the gut” (175). At this point in the novel, Joe commits his first act of violence before his climactic murder of Linden. Since the beginning of *The Round House,* the book has compounded violences; through Joe’s perspective we are overwhelmed with all of these sudden realizations of gendered violence seemingly existing everywhere. We saw how Geraldine’s rape affected her community and now we are seeing how the abuse of Sonja directly affects Joe, which forces us to acknowledge the ripple effects of domestic abuse. Even though it appears that Joe rejects the abuse of Sonja and aids in defending her, it is later revealed that he engages in manipulating and humiliating Sonja so that he can see her striptease. This is the tipping point for Sonja because once Joe engages with these logics that attempt to control and dehumanize women, she finally tells her story, speaks her truth about enduring and surviving abuse and teaches Joe and readers why manipulating, humiliating, and abusing a woman is wrong.

Sonja recounts to Joe her experience growing up in poverty and following her mother’s footsteps in a career as a stripper. Sonja tells an attentive Joe that her mother told her “if you got nothing, you can strip” (222). She reveals that she “got stuck in that life” until she met Whitey: “Whitey courted me. Followed me around the circuit. Whitey started protecting me. He asked me to quit [stripping]. Come live with me, he says” (222). But Sonja confesses that he is “a drunk who hits me” (222). Sonja’s story overwhelms Joe and he starts to cry, feeling guilty about his own acts of manipulating and humiliating her: “Cry all you want, Joe,” says Sonja. “Lots of men cry after they do something nasty to a woman… I thought of you like my son. But you just turned into another piece of shit guy. Another gimme-gimme asshole, Joe. That’s all you are” (222-23). Sonja leaves Joe after telling him her story and shaming him for the toxic behavior he exhibited towards her when she trusted and loved him. Their relationship has seemingly altered irrevocably.

Sonja voices her injustices, this act of speaking her truth is transformative, like Geraldine’s story. The knowledge gained from Sonja’s story influence Joe for the better. “The conflict in me skewed my brain,” says Joe (223). He keeps Sonja’s striptease tassel and uses it as a reminder to not hurt another woman like he hurt her: “every time I look at it, I am reminded of
the way I treated Sonja and about the way she treated me, or about how I threatened her and all that came of it, how I was just another guy. How that killed me once I really thought about it. A gimme-gimme asshole. Maybe I was” (223). The power of Sonja’s story and her confrontation positively affect Joe, though: “Still, after I thought about it for a long time--in fact, all my life--I wanted to be something better” (223). The sort of transformation within Joe would not have taken place if Sonja hand not told her story and voiced her truth.

Sonja’s story teaches us the power of speaking truths about experiences with violence and abuse. Stories are transformative because they hold lessons and convey knowledge from lived experiences, such as the lessons that Joe learns when Sonja speaks, lessons he takes seriously moving forward. From Sonja we learn that domestic abuse is wrong and that its violence inspires violence, as seen in Joe’s reaction, entrapping those in its cyclic brutality. After Sonja’s story, it is revealed that she runs away from Joe, Whitey, and the community, leaving behind a note that reads: “Dear Joe… Treat your mom good. Some day you might deserve how good you grew up… No more of what you saw. Love anyways, Sonja” (239). The significance of Sonja’s character and her story is that she teaches us that destructive, harmful attitudes that devalue women can be broken, as seen in Joe’s realization and promise to be better. It is powerful that Sonja found the courage to share her story and speak her truth and ultimately chose to leave the toxic environment behind. I include Sonja’s story in this analysis because no woman should be manipulated, abused, or humiliated, and my Indigenous feminist literary framework values her story and lived experiences as important sources of lessons and knowledges as to why women deserve humanity.

The Reality of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women: Mayla Wolfskin’s Story

The final story I center in my analysis of violence against women in The Round House is Mayla Wolfskin’s. Her story is particularly difficult to tell because we must rely on others to piece it together since we are denied her voice, but her presence and truth still affects Joe and especially Geraldine. Joe learns about Mayla’s story when Geraldine tells her story of surviving rape, because Mayla was present with her while the crime was taking place. After the murder of Linden, Joe gains greater knowledge about Mayla’s story and learns the disturbing reality of missing and murdered Indigenous women. In order to better understand this, let us discern Mayla’s story and remember her.

Mayla Wolfskin’s story essentially motivates Linden’s rape of Geraldine. Mayla is a teenage high school student from the North Dakota Ojibwe reservation and she worked as an intern for Governor Yeltow, governor of South Dakota. From Linda’s story we learn that Mayla is Linden’s girlfriend: “My girlfriend’s been avoiding me lately,” says Linden, “because a certain highly placed government official has started paying her to be with him. Offering compensation for her favors” (124). Mayla is “an Indian intern making the administration look good” (125). But while Linden tells Linda that Mayla is too young for him, he reveals “this highly placed official grew her up… He’s been growing her up ever since” (125). Mayla, a minor, is pregnant with Yeltow’s child and travels back to the reservation to fill out a form at the tribal enrollment office, where Geraldine works, a form that names “old Yeltow as father of her child” (299). In her essay “Erdrich’s Crusade: Sexual Violence in The Round House,” Tharp emphasizes that “as tribal record keeper, Geraldine now has access to powerful information” (34) that can send Yeltow to prison. Yeltow gives Mayla hush money and Linda tells Joe that Linden “wanted to
run away with [Mayla] on that money, here she won’t share. Won’t go with him. Probably hates him, scared of him. Tries to get Geraldine to help her---so now both of them know the truth” (299). These events ultimately converge at the round house, where Geraldine is raped and where Mayla is last seen alive.

The fact we are denied Mayla’s voice to tell her own story describes a disturbing, violent reality particular to Indigenous women: being missing and being murdered. Mayla is missing after Geraldine escapes the round house and at the end of the novel it is revealed that she has died. Linda is convinced that if Linden, her twin brother, could have raped Geraldine, he had the monstrous power to kill Mayla: “Not everybody’s got a monster,” Linda tells Joe, “and most who do keep it locked up. But I saw the monster in my brother way back in the hospital and it made me deathly ill. I knew that someday he would let it loose” (300). Joe realizes Mayla’s death with the help of Bugger, a reservation community member, telling him his dream about a dead girl. Joe says in response to Bugger’s dream, “I knew, down to the core of me, that [Bugger] had seen Mayla Wolfskin. He had seen her dead body” (310). This tragic case unfortunately echoes a brutal truth about many experiences for Indigenous women. According to the National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center:

During the period of 1979 through 1992, homicide was the third-leading cause of death of Indian females aged 15 to 34, and 75 percent were killed by family members or acquaintances. Since that time, a study by the U.S. Department of Justice has found that in some tribal communities, American Indian women face murder rates that are more than 10 times the national average. Since 2005, there has been increased awareness of the pattern of the disappearance of Native women and the failure of the criminal justice system to adequately respond to the crisis. (niwrc.org)

Erdrich’s novel takes place in the year 1988, so it is likely she is concerned not only by the rape of Indigenous women, but with the phenomenon of missing and murdered Indigenous women, too. The novel extends the gender justice concerns and through Joe’s perspective, we are again made as witnesses to the stories of gendered violences that terrorize reservation communities.

Mayla’s story is affecting because it exposes a most worrisome truth about a particularly malicious violence against women, especially Indigenous women, that is part of Erdrich’s crusade to voice opposition against all the forms of gendered violence and its injustices. The systemic violence of missing and murdered Indigenous women haunts the novel as Mayla never speaks to Joe or Linda or Bazil or anyone except for Geraldine before her death. Mayla does not survive to tell her story. But her story is still told by those that remember her, including Linda and Geraldine. Therefore, though Mayla has tragically passed and been denied a voice, her story is still remembered and spoken by others, keeping her memory alive.

My Indigenous feminist literary framework recognizes all these stories as important truths to be told about violences against women rooted in destructive, harmful logics and systems. I include the stories of Linda, Geraldine, Sonja, and Mayla as necessary stories to consider how severe gendered violence and its injustices actually are. The systems of law fail in protecting and providing justice for all of these women. Their stories voice their truths about
surviving violence and providing knowledge about why the violences they experienced are 
deeply, morally wrong. Louise Erdrich’s novel *The Round House* is largely about stories of pain. 
And while these stories articulate each woman’s experience with pain, we turn our attention to 
stories that help heal the pain.

**How Do We Heal? Theories of Mobility and Healing from Storytelling and Stories of Lived 
Experiences**

Rhetoric scholar Andrea Riley Mukavetz (Chippewa of Thames First Nation) writes that 
“recovery, like storying, is about relationships--relationality. There isn’t an origin or a center; 
instead, there is a web of responsibility and accountability” (10). Because I write with a spirit of 
inclusivity, I acknowledge that all the stories we have discussed regarding pain serve to promote 
solidarity against gendered violence. Therefore, in considering theories of mobility and healing 
from stories, we must again center these stories and view them as connected to one another, 
related in a communal sense. Given the ways in which these violences against women have 
mutually affected individuals and communities, we can now discern how communities can help 
heal these wounds together.

From Linda’s story we learn that mobility and healing are possible with the help of love, 
family, and community. Linda was abandoned by her birth mother, Grace Lark, because of 
Linda’s congenital deformity. “Let it die,” says Grace when asked by the doctor “if he should use 
extraordinary means” to save Linda when she is born (115). “But while the doctor’s back was 
turned,” says Linda, “the nurse cleared my mouth with her finger, shook me upside down, and 
swaddled me tight in another blanket, pink. I took a blazing breath” (115). After being saved by 
the nurse, the Larks refused to take Linda home. But Linda shares that “the night janitor at the 
hospital, a reservation woman named Betty Wishkob, asked for permission to hold me on her 
brake. While cradling me, with her back turned to the observation window, Betty---Mom--- 
nursed me… So I was saved and grew up with the Wishkobs” (115-116). Linda’s story 
highlights the mobile power of family: because Betty Wishkob nursed and adopted her, Linda 
gained the mobility to proceed through life and grow. Love is emphasized as a saving force, and 
Betty Wishkob acts with a deep Indigenous ethos of favoring adoption and family. Linda’s 
healing comes from love, family, and being accepted into a community when her birth family 
denied her. The contributions Linda in turn makes to her community as a healed person are 
realized when she helps Joe after he murders Linden. Even though Linden is blood-related to 
Linda and arguably her family, she rejects his relation to her because he abandoned and abused 
her and instead chooses to help her adopted reservation community and its members like Joe. “I 
would do anything in the world for your family,” Linda tells Joe. “I am devoted to you guys” 
(299). Because Linda was saved by Betty Wishkob, saved by an Indigenous sense of love and 
family, Linda practices these values and helps Joe and his family move forward because they 
have helped and welcomed her as a valued, loved member of the reservation community.

For Geraldine’s story we will consider the Akiikwe story, as told to Joe and to us by 
Mooshum, which provides an Indigenous theory of justice that aids in her and her family’s 
ability to begin healing. The story of Akiikwe describes the life of Akiikwe, Earth Woman, an 
Ojibwe woman, who is attacked by her husband and the men in her village, accused of being a 
wiindigoo (evil spirit). Akiikwe experiences violence and injustice, much like Geraldine, but she 
remains unkillled and is ultimately saved by her son, Nanapush, and Buffalo Woman. Scholar
Mary Paniccia Carden eloquently articulates how the Akiikwe tale echoes Geraldine’s story of survival: “Geraldine is an unkillable mother, like Akiikwe and Buffalo Woman before her, and her transformation from little more than a corpse to a new formidable woman mirrors the resilience of Ojibwe culture itself” (111). Geraldine endures violence and lives to tell her own story, as addressed earlier, and this strength is likened to the strength of her ancestors in these traditional storytelling scenes. Akiikwe’s story also relates the sacredness of the round house and the round house as a place where justice exists, which is juxtaposed in the novel, as stated above, with the fact that it is the place where Geraldine’s rape occurs: “This buffalo knew what had happened to Nanapush’s mother. She said wiindigoo justice must be pursued with great care. A place should be built so that people could do things in a good way” (187). This part of the story enlightens Joe and us as readers that there is a traditional, tribal form of justice, wiindigoo justice, and that it is valued and offers healing. Though Joe’s murder of Linden would render him as a perpetrator of an illegal crime, Bazil confirms at the end of the novel that Linden’s death meets a “traditional precedent”: “It could argued” says Bazil, “that Lark met the definition of a wiindigoo, and that with no other recourse, his killing fulfilled the requirements of a very old law” (306). Akiikwe’s story therefore offers not only an Indigenous theory of justice and freedom, but mobility through this Indigenous thought. This Indigenous thinking about justice and freedom allows Joe and his family to endure tragedy and to keep their capacity for mobility alive. This Indigenous thinking grants a legal alternative for Geraldine so she and her family can begin their healing. Healing also happens as Geraldine’s own spoken words and her lived experience names the violence she has survived. Geraldine powerfully confronts her violence by explicitly saying “I was raped” (158). She does not deny her violence but instead names it and demands attention for it. The fact that Geraldine can voice her lived experience with violence assures us that if she can survive and talk about it, then she can heal.

Regarding Sonja and Mayla, it is questionable whether we can discern theories of healing. This does not mean that healing and mobility are impossible for Sonja and Mayla, only that both of their cases present complex, realistic scenarios in which we see how difficult it is to fully escape gendered violence. When we last discussed Sonja’s story we learned that she ran away from her toxic environment. Yet towards the end of the novel we realize that she decided to return to Whitey. White tells Joe, “She’s coming home… Gonna be different now, she said, her game. But I don’t care. I don’t care. Whatever you think---he looked away from me carefully---I’m stone in love with that old girl. You understand? She’s coming back to me, Joe” (289). The reveals how recurring domestic abuse is and just how hard it can be for someone like Sonja to escape its entrapping cycle. This could be an intentional story ending on Erdrich’s part that lacks clear theories of healing and mobility in order to further expose the troubling reality and nature of domestic abuse.

Lastly we as readers are unfortunately denied a theory of healing and mobility in Mayla’s case because her death revealed in the novel, just like we are denied her voice. Yet even though Mayla has been denied voice, justice, and healing, her story is still remembered and she is not forgotten by Geraldine or her reservation community. Again, this could be an intentional story ending on Erdrich’s part that articulates how deeply haunting and disturbing the reality of missing and murdered Indigenous women is and why we should be concerned about this gendered violence and its unacceptable injustice, socially and morally.
Conclusion

In my Indigenous feminist literary analysis of *The Round House* I considered how diversity, inclusivity, and solidarity in the stories of Linda, Geraldine, Sonja, and Mayla confront the various violences against women that they are forced to contend with. In each story justice from modern systems of law has been denied to them. My Indigenous feminist framework made a case to argue that violence against *any* and *all* women *is* and *should be* intolerable to Indigenous feminism. I centered these women’s stories in this essay and in doing so we listened to their truths about the violences they experienced and we valued their knowledge about the lessons as to why these violences are totally unacceptable. My analysis values these stories and centers stories and creates storytelling as an inclusive framework that brings recognition to various truths about various violences from various women. This framework is necessary for tackling the manifold violences of settler colonialism and colonial heteropatriarchal logics that dehumanize and harm Indigenous communities and also the larger society. When women speak we should listen, and when women are hurting, we should help them no matter their background. While Erdrich’s novel deals with a lot of stories about pain, mobility, despite ongoing pain, is highlighted in the end with the last line, “we just kept going” (317). Erdrich does not bring the reader’s attention to the philosophy of justice in the conclusion of the novel; rather, focus is given to the sentiment of perseverance.

I was fortunate to attend a Wisconsin Reads event at Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community College in Hayward, Wisconsin on April 28, 2018. *The Round House* was the chosen book for this year’s literary festival, and Louise Erdrich read at the event. When asked about the ending of the novel, she responded that the ending is meant to be realistic. “We endure,” said Erdrich, her words echoing through the domed room as everyone sat there quietly and listened to what she had to say. “We are going to go on.”
Works Cited

Carden, Mary Paniccia. “‘The Unkillable Mother’: Sovereignty and Survivance in Louise Erdrich’s *The Round House*.” *Studies in American Indian Literature*, vol. 30, no. 1, Spring 2018, pp. 94-116


