

للويز ايردرتش "LaRose" القانون الاستعماري مقابل

السيادة القبلية في رواية

دراسة في العدالة والذاكرة والسيادة الأصلانية

**Colonial Law vs. Tribal Sovereignty in Louise
Erdrich's *LaRose***

**A Study of Justice, Memory, and Indigenous
Sovereignty**

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**الكلمات المفتاحية: LaRose, لويز ايردرتش, العدالة التصالحية, الذاكرة الجمعية, السيادة
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الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في رواية "لاروز" (LaRose) للكاتبة لويز إيردريش، من خلال مفاهيم العدالة التصالحية، والذاكرة الجماعية، والسيادة السكانية الأصلية. ويركز البحث على واقعة القتل غير العمد للطفل "دوستي رافيتش" على يد "لاندروا آيرون"، وكيف تتحول هذه الحادثة من مأساة فردية إلى أزمة أخلاقية وجماعية تعالجها الرواية خارج حدود القانون العقابي الغربي. وتُظهر الدراسة كيف تقدّم "إيردريش" العدالة كفعلٍ من أفعال التكفير عن الذنب، وبناء صلات القرى، والشفاء، وإعادة التوازن داخل مجتمع السكان الأصليين.

كما يبيّن البحث أن الذاكرة وتاريخ العائلة، لا سيما من خلال اسم "لاروز" الذي يتكرر عبر الأجيال، يمثلان وسيلة لمقاومة المحو الاستعماري والحفاظ على هوية السكان الأصليين. وتوضح الرواية كذلك أهمية الطقوس الروحية وتعدد الأصوات السردية (polyphony) كشكل من أشكال السيادة الثقافية والأخلاقية. وبذلك، تؤكد الدراسة أن رواية "لاروز" تقدّم السيادة القبلية ليس مجرد مفهوم قانوني فحسب، بل كممارسة حية ترتكز على الذاكرة، والعدالة، وقرابة الدم، والشفاء الجماعي.

Abstract

This research examines Louise Erdrich's novel *LaRose* through concepts of restorative justice, collective memory, and Indigenous sovereignty. The research focuses on the accidental murder of the child Dusty Ravich by Landreaux Iron, and how this incident transforms from an individual tragedy into a moral and collective crisis that the novel addresses outside the boundaries of Western punitive law. The research shows that Erdrich delivers justice as an act of atonement, kinship, healing, and restoring balance within the indigenous community.

The research also shows that memory and family history, particularly through the name "LaRose" repeated across generations, represent a means of resisting colonial erasure and preserving indigenous identity. The novel also demonstrates the importance of spiritual rituals and narrative polyphony as forms of cultural and moral sovereignty. The study thus confirms that *LaRose* presents tribal sovereignty not only as a legal concept, but as a living practice based on memory, justice, kinship, and collective healing.

Introduction

Louise Erdrich's *LaRose* is an important American fundamentalist novel that examines how a fundamentalist group responds to loss through justice, memory, kinship, and cultural responsibility. Published in 2016, the novel won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, and the award announcement describes the novel as “a haunting account of an accidental shooting and its aftermath for two Native American families” (National Book Critics Circle, 2017). This description is important because it identifies the central conflict in the novel: a personal tragedy that turns into a broader moral, cultural, and collective crisis. In *LaRose*, Erdrich does not present justice as a simple legal procedure. Instead, it explores justice as a process of healing, restoring, remembering, and preserving original values. The novel begins with the accidental death of Dusty Ravitch, a young boy who is wrongly killed by Landro Iron during a hunting trip. This incident creates a painful rift between the Iron family and the Ravitch family. However, Erdrich does not treat the event solely as a crime or an individual error. Rather, he presents it as a wound that affects the entire group. Landru and his wife Emmaline respond by giving their son "LaRose" to Dusty's grieving parents, Peter and Nola Ravitch, as an act of atonement based on an ancient Ojibwe practice. Through this act, the novel shifts the meaning of justice from punishment to restoration. Justice in *LaRose* is not just about identifying guilt; it is about repairing damaged relationships and restoring balance within the group (Erdrich, 2016).

This retrospective model of justice is directly related to the theoretical framework: colonial law versus tribal sovereignty. In colonial and Western legal systems, justice is usually linked to institutions, evidence, punishment, and state power. In *LaRose*, Erdrich highlights a different model of justice, one rooted in original morality, kinship, spiritual responsibility, and collective healing. This does not mean that the novel completely rejects the law. Rather, it reveals that colonial law is often very limited in addressing the emotional, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of indigenous suffering. For this reason, *LaRose* becomes a powerful literary text for examining how Indigenous sovereignty persists not only across political institutions, but also across cultural practices and moral traditions.

Memory is one of the most important elements in this process. In *LaRose*, memory is not simply an evocation of the past; it is a living force that shapes identity, justice, and sovereignty. The name “LaRose” has a long lineage, linking the modern child to earlier figures of the same name. Through this repetition of the label, Erdrich links the present tragedy to a deeper Aslani history of survival, suffering, and continuity. The novel therefore suggests that justice cannot be separated from memory. For the wounds of the present to heal, the community must remember its past, including its traditions, losses, and inherited responsibilities. In this sense,



memory becomes a form of indigenous resistance because it preserves cultural identity against colonial erasure.

This link between memory and resistance can be understood through Patrick Wolfe's theory of settler colonialism. Wolfe argues that settler colonialism is not merely a historical event but an ongoing structure that seeks to eliminate indigenous existence and replace indigenous authority (Wolfe, 2006). In this theoretical context, Erdrich's focus on Ojibwe memory and traditional justice becomes politically significant. The "old way" followed by Landro and Emmeline is not presented as a primitive or outdated custom. Rather, it appears as a lingering Indigenous legal-cultural practice that challenges the dominance of colonial law. By allowing the group to define responsibility and healing on its own terms, the novel represents tribal sovereignty as a living practice rather than an abstract legal concept.

Critics have often placed *LaRose* within Erdrich's broader "Justice Trilogy," along with *The Plague of Doves* and *The Round House*. Schweninger states that these three novels are brought together because they explore justice in "legal, theological, metaphysical, and personal meanings" (Schweninger, 2022). This critical insight is useful because *LaRose* does not narrowly define justice. Rather, the novel presents justice as a complex process that includes memory, grief, family, spirituality, and collective responsibility. Similarly, Coulombe argues that *LaRose* "interrogates the possibility of restorative justice after the accidental killing of a child" (Coulombe, 2022). This supports the idea that Erdrich's novel is not just about tragedy, but about the possibility of healing after violence and loss.

Therefore, *LaRose*'s original sovereignty is not limited to official policy, treaties, or court systems. Rather, it appears in the group's ability to respond to harm according to its own values. This is central to the message because Erdrich's literature repeatedly shows that colonial law often fails to understand indigenous life in its full moral and cultural complexity. In *The Round House*, this failure is demonstrated by judicial confusion and the inability of American law to protect Native women. At *LaRose*, the legal struggle is less direct, but criticism remains strong. The novel asks whether state law can truly heal a collective, historical, and spiritual grief. Erdrich's answer suggests that true justice requires more than punishment; it requires memory, responsibility, and the restoration of relationships.

The novel's interest in restorative justice is also linked to broader Indigenous legal and cultural thought. Sarah Deer argues that justice for Indigenous groups must be understood in relation to the history of colonial violence and the restoration of tribal power (Deer, 2015). Although Derr's work focuses specifically on sexual violence and indigenous women, her argument is relevant to *LaRose* because both emphasize that indigenous

groups must have the ability to define harm and healing according to their own cultural frameworks. In this way, *LaRose* represents justice as an indigenous sovereign act: the community does not wait for colonial law to define the meaning of reform. Rather, she returns to her memory, her habits, and her relational ethics.

Accordingly, *LaRose* can be read as a novel about justice, memory, and original sovereignty. Justice is demonstrated through the act of atonement and an attempt to restore balance after Dusty's death. Memory is shown through the recurring name "LaRose" and through the movement of the novel between past and present. Indigenous sovereignty is demonstrated by the survival of Ojibwe moral traditions and the community's authority to imagine justice outside colonial legal structures. Through these elements, Erdrich offers a powerful alternative to Western punitive justice. It shows that indigenous justice is restorative rather than merely punitive, collective rather than individual, and rooted in memory rather than separate from history. Therefore, *LaRose* is fundamental to the study of colonial law versus tribal sovereignty, because it shows how indigenous groups maintain their sovereignty through cultural memory, moral responsibility, and restorative justice.

4.1 Historical background of *LaRose*

Louise Erdrich's novel *LaRose* (2016) is based on a profound historical and social background relating to the long colonial legacy of indigenous peoples in the United States, particularly the Ojibwe/Anishinabe tribes. Unlike *The Round House*, which focuses on the failure of direct legal justice, *LaRose* is concerned with the impact of settler colonialism across generations on collective memory, inherited trauma, and restorative justice mechanisms within tribal society.

The historical context of the novel begins with Patrick Wolfe's theoretical framework of settler colonialism as a continuous structure based on "the logic of exclusion," where colonialism aims not only for temporary control, but also to physically and culturally erase the original existence in order to re-own the land (Wolfe, 2006, pp. 387–388). This logic is reflected in *LaRose* through the presence of the Earth as a living memory bearing trace of historical violence, where the present cannot be separated from a long history of confiscation, displacement, and social disintegration.

One of the novel's most important historical roots is the history of Native American boarding school policies, which began in the late nineteenth century and continued until the mid-twentieth century. These policies aimed to “kill the Indian and save the human” by separating children from their families and preventing them from their indigenous languages and cultures. Historian David Wallace Adams has documented this experience as a systematic colonial project to forcibly reshape indigenous identity, noting that these schools left long-lasting psychological and social damage (Adams, 1995, pp. 52–54). As Brenda J. Child, the effects of this experience did not stop with the generation that entered schools but were transmitted to subsequent generations through the disintegration of family ties and the disruption of parenting styles and tenderness (Child, 1998, pp. 5–7).

In this context, *LaRose* intersects with the concept of transgenerational trauma as developed by researcher Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, which shows that mass traumas resulting from colonialism, displacement, and policies of cultural genocide are reproduced psychologically and socially across generations, even in the absence of the original event itself (Brave Heart, 1999, pp. 60–62). The tragedy of the murdered child in the novel and the collective feelings of guilt and loss that follow, is a literary example of this kind of inherited trauma.

The novel is also based on the history of tribal justice systems that preceded Western law, which were based on the principle of restoring social balance rather than retaliatory punishment. In his study of restorative justice, Howard Zehr explains that restorative justice focuses on admitting wrongdoing, taking moral responsibility, and involving the group in the healing process rather than being limited to punishment (Zehr, 2002, pp. 21–23). This historical framework interprets the act of handing over the child “*LaRose*” to the victim's family in the novel as a practice rooted in ancient tribal traditions aimed at restoring the social fabric torn apart by crime.

The novel also reflects the history of the forced overlap between Christianity and indigenous spiritual beliefs, an overlap resulting from centuries of forced evangelization and attempts to erase the indigenous religion. Philip J.'s studies indicate. Deloria concluded that this religious hybridization was not a harmonious fusion, but rather the result of a long colonial pressure that forced indigenous peoples to reshape their beliefs within a dominant cultural framework (Deloria, 2004, pp. 156–158). This dimension appears in *LaRose* through the tense coexistence of Christian rituals and indigenous spiritual practices within the family and community. Accordingly, it can be said that the historical background of *LaRose*'s novel is based on three main axes: settler colonialism as an extended structure, inherited traumas resulting from policies of cultural exclusion, and tribal

restorative justice systems as a moral alternative to Western punitive justice. In this context, Erdrich does not present an account of an individual incident but rather a literary text documenting a history of loss and resistance, emphasizing that collective healing is not achieved by forgetting, but rather by confronting the past and transforming pain into a shared moral responsibility.

4.2 Restorative justice in Louise Erdrich's novel *LaRose*

In Louise Erdrich's novel *LaRose*, restorative justice is presented as an original moral response to harm, loss, and collective rupture. The novel begins with a tragic incident when Landro Iron shoots a deer but accidentally kills Dusty Ravitch, the young son of his neighbor and close friend. The moment is told with shocking directness: "Only when he walked forward to investigate and looked down did, he understood that he had killed his neighbor's son" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 4). This incident creates a crisis that cannot be resolved solely through legal investigation or punishment. Instead, Erdrich uses tragedy to explore a deeper form of justice based on atonement, kinship, sacrifice, and healing.

Initially, the novel shows the natural movement towards revenge. Nola's sadness immediately turns to anger, and she shouts, "Execute him! Execute the son of a bitch!" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 4). Her reaction is important because it represents the first emotional form of justice: revenge. The novel intensifies this desire by adding that Nola "wanted blood everlasting" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 5). Through these statements, Erdrich shows that revenge is an understandable response to unbearable loss, but it cannot restore the broken life of the community. Revenge may answer for pain with greater pain, but it cannot heal Dusty's absence, Landru's guilt, or the damaged relationship between Iron and Ravitch's families.

Here restorative justice becomes central. Restorative justice generally seeks to repair harm rather than simply punish the offender. The Restorative Justice Council defines this as a process that brings together "those harmed by crime or conflict and those responsible for harm in communication," allowing those affected to participate in repairing the harm (Restorative Justice Council, n.d.). Similarly, UNODC articulates restorative justice as a response focused on reparations, holding perpetrators accountable, and engaging victims, perpetrators, and groups in the reform process (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020). This definition applies to *LaRose* because the novel does not remove Landru from the community through punishment; rather, it forces the two families to remain connected through responsibility and grief.

This quote clearly supports the idea of restorative justice in *LaRose*. Children realize that *LaRose*'s presence in the Ravich family not only compensates for Dusty but also helps both families survive grief:



Hollis said that because LaRose went over to the Raviches he saved them. Willard said he missed LaRose. Josette said both things her brothers said were true, and that she was glad he'd broken Maggie closer. Snow said LaRose had saved both families. He was a little healer” (Erdrich, 2016, p. 147) .

The phrase “saved both families” shows that justice in the novel is restorative rather than punitive: it is based on healing, emotional repair, and rebuilding broken relationships. "LaRose's" description as “a little healer” also links justice to original ideas of spiritual and collective balance, supporting the letter's argument that Erdrich presents original justice as an alternative to colonial legal punishment.

After the incident, Emmaline poses the question that shapes the moral direction of the entire novel: “What happens now?” (Erdrich, 2016, p. 6). This question is not only practical; it is ethical and cultural. It asks what justice can mean after something “unsayable” happens (Erdrich, 2016, p. 6). The phrase “unsayable thing” indicates that language, law, and ordinary social customs are insufficient in the face of such grief. The family first moves through formal and religious structures: there is “the short investigation” before Landru is released, then Emmaline goes with him “straight to the priest” (Erdrich, 2016, p. 7). However, these institutions cannot fully answer the wound. She may record the event, pray, or process it procedurally, but she cannot restore balance.

The restorative narrative's answer comes from an ancient Ojibwe form of atonement. The back cover of the raised edition clearly summarizes the central verb: After seeking guidance through the Ojibwe tradition, Landru and Emmaline decide to give "LaRose" to Dusty's parents, saying: “Our son will be your son now” (Erdrich, 2016, back cover). This act is not a legal punishment imposed by the state. Rather, it is a cultural and moral decision rooted in indigenous memory. "LaRose" becomes a living form of compensation, not because he replaces Dusty, but because his presence creates a painful bridge between two wounded families. Justice here is not the closing of a wound; it is the beginning of a long process of relational reform.

Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz's reading of *LaRose* supports this interpretation. He argues that neither the judicial system nor religion can provide complete relief after a tragedy; rather, it is “the Ojibwe tradition of atonement and reparation” and LaRose's presence that begin to heal the wounds opened by the incident (Ibarrola-Armendariz, 2023). This critical insight is useful because it shows that Erdrich is not just telling a family story. It embodies a legal-cultural alternative to colonial justice. Western law can investigate death, but it cannot fully address the emotional, spiritual, and collective harm that follows. Fundamental restorative justice reaches those deeper levels because it understands harm as relational.

The novel also shows that restorative justice is powerful but not easy. Moving "LaRose" doesn't heal everyone immediately. Emmaline suffers separation from her son; Nola remains unstable in her grief; Peter becomes emotionally dependent on LaRose; and "LaRose" himself carries the grief of adults. Later, Emmaline reaches a moment where she says: "I can't stand it anymore", explaining that "it was never claimed to go on forever" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 231). These phrases are important because they prevent a romantic reading of restorative justice. Erdrich does not offer original atonement as simple or painless. Rather, it shows that restoration requires sacrifice, emotional endurance, and constant negotiation.

Meanwhile, "LaRose's" presence gradually becomes healing. During the first anniversary of Dusty's death, the family gathers in pipe weather, and the children learn about "LaRose's" role. Hollis says that "because LaRose went over to the Raviches he saved them", while Snow says that "LaRose had saved both families" and describes it as "a little healer" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 147). This moment is central to the idea of restorative justice because it shows that "LaRose's" role is collective. It does not heal just one person; it becomes a point of connection between two families. His presence prevents complete separation and turns grief into a shared, albeit painful, responsibility.

This conciliatory model is also directly related to indigenous sovereignty. In *LaRose*, sovereignty is not simply a political or legal status; it appears as the group's ability to define justice according to its own values. Patrick Wolfe's theory of settler colonialism helps clarify this point. Wolfe argues that settler colonialism is not merely a past event but an ongoing structure; as he famously says, "Invasion is a structure not an event" (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). Within this framework, the survival of "the old way" in *LaRose* becomes a form of resistance to colonial erasure. The Ojibwe practice of atonement shows that indigenous justice remains alive despite the dominance of colonial legal institutions.

Therefore, restorative justice at *LaRose* operates on multiple levels. On a personal level, it is Landru's attempt to atone for Dusty's death. On a family level, the Iron and Ravich families are bound together after an unbearable loss. At the collective level, it seeks to restore balance within the Ojibwe community. On a theoretical level, it challenges colonial law by showing that justice should not be limited to punishment, trial, and legal closure. Through *LaRose*, Erdrich offers justice as reparation, kinship, memory, and healing. In this way, *LaRose* becomes a powerful literary example of indigenous sovereignty, because it shows an Indigenous group maintaining its own moral system in the face of colonial legal structures.

4.3 Collective memory and family history in Louise Erdrich's novel *LaRose*



In Louise Erdrich's novel *LaRose*, collective memory and family history are central elements in the novel's understanding of original identity, healing, and sovereignty. The novel begins with the accidental murder of Dusty Ravich by the Landreaux Iron, but Erdrich does not allow this event to remain merely a private family tragedy. Instead, the incident opens up a broader history of grief, legacy, trauma, and cultural survival. Baby "LaRose" becomes the point at which two affected family's bonds, but he also carries a much older history through his name. Therefore, "LaRose's" family history is not merely genealogical; it becomes a living archive of indigenous memory.

From the beginning, Erdrich frames the name "LaRose" as more than one individual name. The dedication itself is important: the novel is dedicated "for every LaRose" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 9). This phrase suggests that "LaRose" is not just one child in one family but a recurring character across generations. The name carries memory, loss, and survival. Later, the novel further illustrates this idea when "LaRose" says a precedent: "I wrote my name for all of us" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 134).

This short phrase is essential to understanding collective memory in the novel. The act of writing a name is not just a personal pride; it is an act of preservation. The speaker writes the name in hidden places because official history, particularly colonial history, has often erased Indigenous names, bodies, and voices. By writing "LaRose", she resists disappearance. The name becomes a survival sign against institutional erasure. The uploaded text shows that these names are written across boarding school spaces such as Fort Totten, Wahpeton, Landreau, and Carlisle, and the novel states that "the history of LaRose is tied up in those schools" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 134). The memory of these boarding schools is directly linked to the framework of the message: colonial law versus tribal sovereignty. Boarding schools have historically served as colonial institutions designed to weaken indigenous languages, kinship systems, spirituality, and cultural memory. In *LaRose*, Erdrich turns these sites of assimilation into sites of memory. Hidden inscriptions of the name "LaRose" transform spaces of colonial discipline into spaces of indigenous testimony. In this sense, memory becomes a form of resistance. The colonial establishment tries to erase the original identity, but the recurring name remains inside the building, under the roofs, in places "they would never see" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 134). Through this image, Erdrich suggests that indigenous memory remains alive even when the colonial authority tries to bury it.

Critically, *LaRose's* trauma and healing studies support this reading. Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz argues that the novel deals with "historical injustice, collective grief, transgenerational trauma, revenge, and acts of reparation" after Dusty's accidental death (Ibarrola-Armendariz, 2023). This is important because the tragedy of the present novel is never separated from

the past. Dusty's death awakens grief not only in both families but in the wider Aslani community as well. The pain of the present echo's older histories of displacement, violence, residential school trauma, and broken kinship. Thus, collective memory gives the novel its deeper structure: it links a single-family tragedy to a longer history of original resilience.

Family history is also central to the lineage of the LaRoses. Near the end of the novel, Erdrich states that "there are five LaRoses" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 290). The novel then traces the name across generations: LaRose I, her daughter, *LaRose III*, *LaRose IV*, and finally the contemporary child LaRose given to the Ravich family after Dusty's death. This lineage shows that the child does not stand alone. He is the last bearer of a name that moved through colonial violence, mission school, disease, survival, and family transition (Erdrich, 2016, p. 290).

This lineage turns family history into collective history. Each *LaRose* carries a piece of the community's past. The first *LaRose* is associated with poisoning, mission school, marriage, stolen bones, and spiritual knowledge. Later LaRoses are associated with Carlisle and Fort Totten, both of which invoke the history of Aboriginal boarding schools. Therefore, contemporary "LaRose" inherits not just a family name; it inherits a historical burden. His identity is shaped by previous generations, particularly women whose suffering and strength continue to influence the present. This makes family history in *LaRose* a form of "women's history", because indigenous women become bearers of cultural memory.

Mei Wan's study of Ojibwe spirituality in *LaRose* is useful here. Wan argues that the novel represents trauma healing through Ojibwe spirituality, particularly through adoption as spiritual compensation, naming, biological inheritance, and spiritual strength (Wan, 2018). This critical view supports the idea that the naming in *LaRose* is not decorative. The name "LaRose" carries power because it connects a child to a spiritual and family legacy. Contemporary *LaRose* can become a partial healer because he belongs to a longer lineage of LaRoses whose memory has survived through family history and spiritual continuity.

The novel's use of collective memory also challenges the logic of colonial law. Colonial law often treated indigenous peoples as individuals within state systems, separating them from tribal history, kinship, land, and spiritual inheritance. Erdrich resists this by making identity relational and historical. *LaRose* is not only a mutual "son" between two families; he is also a descendant, a bearer of a name, and a symbolic continuity of the community's past. Therefore, the family becomes a sovereign structure of memory. It preserves what colonial regimes try to fragment: kinship, story, commitment, and the right to define meaning from within Indigenous culture.



This point relates to Patrick Wolfe's theory of settler colonialism. Wolfe argues that settler colonialism is not just a past event but an ongoing structure that seeks to eliminate indigenous existence and power (Wolfe, 2006). In *LaRose*, collective memory resists this structure by refusing to disappear. The recurring name "LaRose", the hidden writing in residential schools, and the transmission of family stories all defy the colonial attempt to make indigenous history invisible. The novel does not present memory as nostalgia. Indeed, memory is effective: it shapes justice, identity, and healing in the present.

Family history also strengthens the novel's treatment of restorative justice. The act of giving "LaRose" to the Ravich family becomes meaningful because it is rooted in an older fundamentalist practice. The back cover of the raised edition describes the verb as "a profound act of atonement with ancient roots in Native American culture", and explains that Landreaux and Emmaline give "LaRose" to Dusty's parents after referring to the Ojibwe tradition for guidance (Erdrich, 2016, back cover). Thus, restorative justice in the novel depends on memory. The group can imagine reform because it remembers older forms of responsibility. Without collective memory, the act of atonement would seem strange or irrational within a Western legal framework. With memory, it becomes a culturally meaningful response to harm.

The spiritual dimension of memory appears again when the novel describes the inherited power of LaRoses. After identifying the five LaRoses, the narrative says that the songs associated with them "half lost"; however, "the drumming of the water drum will never be lost" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 290). This is one of the novel's clearest expressions of cultural survival. The phrase "half lost" acknowledges the damage caused by colonial history: some songs, practices, and memories have been weakened. But to say that water drums "will never be lost" refuses to be completely erased. Erdrich therefore presents the original memory as wounded but still alive. For this reason, collective memory in *LaRose* is closely linked to indigenous sovereignty. Sovereignty is not just a matter of courts, treaties, or federal recognition. It also exists in the group's ability to remember itself, name itself, and pass on its values across generations. The survival of the "LaRose" name proves that indigenous identity is not defined solely by colonial records or legal categories. It is also defined by family memory, oral history, spiritual inheritance, and collective responsibility. In this way, Erdrich's narrative itself becomes a sovereign act: it tells Indigenous history from within the indigenous kinship rather than from an external perspective of colonial power.

In conclusion, *LaRose's* collective memory and family history are fundamental to the novel's legal-cultural meaning. Through the recurring

name LaRose, the memory of boarding schools, the lineage of the five LaRoses, and the survival of spiritual practices, Erdrich shows that Indigenous identity is carried through family history and collective memory. These memories are painful because they contain trauma, loss, and colonial violence; but they are also healing because they preserve cultural continuity. For the message of colonial law versus tribal sovereignty, this section is important because it shows that sovereignty in LaRose is not just political. It is also remembered, narrated, inherited, and practiced throughout family history. Finally, the novel suggests that justice cannot be separated from memory, because the group must remember who it is before it can recover what was broken.

4.4 Spiritual Rituals and Moral Sovereignty in *LaRose*

In Louise Erdrich's novel *LaRose*, spiritual rituals are not presented as decorative cultural details; rather, they function as a moral system through which the Ojibwe seek guidance, healing, and moral balance after tragedy. The novel begins by describing Landreaux as a man moving between the Catholic faith and Ojibwe spirituality. It is "a devout Catholic who also followed traditional ways," and Erdrich adds that it is "would kill a dealer, thank one god in English, and put down tobacco for another god in Ojibwe" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 3). This sentence is important because it shows that the moral world of Landreaux is not subject to a single formal religious system. Rather, his identity is shaped by a mixed but meaningful spiritual practice, linking the Catholic faith, the Ojibwe ritual, language, hunting, land, and gratitude.

After Landreaux wrongly kills the child Dusty, spiritual practice becomes a way to search for moral direction. Official law can investigate the incident, but it cannot tell families how to live with the wound. For this reason, the novel is oriented towards the weather. The back cover of the uploaded edition states that Landreaux tends "to an Ojibwe tribe tradition — the sweat lodge—for guidance" and that this leads to the decision to give LaRose to Dusty's parents as an act of atonement (Erdrich, 2016, back cover). The sweat house here is not just a religious ritual; it becomes a space for moral decision-making. It allows the characters to search for an original answer to a harm that Western law cannot fully repair.

"As he warmed up, she and LaRose built a fire, Drew Tobacco from a special pouch into it, put grandfather rocks in it, made it hotter, hotter. They broke out the copper bucket and ladelle, the other blankets and medications, everything they needed" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 10).

This quote shows that *LaRose's* spiritual ritual is not a marginal cultural detail but a source of moral guidance after the tragedy. Fire, tobacco, "grandfather rocks", and medicine create a sacred space in which grief turns into responsibility. Through this ritual, Erdrich presents Ojibwe



spirituality as a form of moral sovereignty, because the community seeks healing through its own cultural practices rather than relying solely on colonial law or official religion.

The sweat house scene also shows how the weather connects body, earth, and spirit. Emmaline and *LaRose* prepare the weather by building a fire, throwing tobacco into it, placing “grandfather rocks” inside it, and arranging “pipes” and a “medicine bundle” (Erdrich, 2016, p. 10). These things carry cultural meaning. Tobacco is associated with prayer and offering; rocks are treated as living elders or “grandparents”; and pipes and medicine bundles connect the family to inherited spiritual knowledge. Through these details, Erdrich presents Ojibwe spirituality as an effective moral practice, not folklore. The family does not simply talk about guilt; rather, it enters into a ritual process that forces it to face responsibility.

Here spiritual ritual becomes associated with moral sovereignty. Moral sovereignty means the ability of a group to define right action, responsibility, and healing according to its own cultural and spiritual values. Amanda J explains. Cobb argues that for indigenous nations, “concepts of governance and culture are inseparable” and cites the idea that sovereignty may consist in “continued cultural integrity” (Cobb, 2005, p. 121). This idea is very useful for reading *LaRose*. The novel does not present sovereignty only as legal jurisdiction or political recognition. Rather, sovereignty appears in the group's ability to decide what justice requires after Dusty's death. The decision to give “*LaRose*” to the Ravich family comes from a moral world shaped by ritual, kinship, and ancestral memory.

Spiritual authority is also demonstrated through *LaRose* " himself. It is repeatedly associated with healing, intuition, and spirit guidance. When Maggie suspects him, *LaRose* says: “I got some spirit helpers” (Erdrich, 2016, p. 227). This phrase sounds childish, but it is also serious within the spiritual logic of the novel. “*LaRose*” is not just a child exchanged between two families; Rather, it becomes a healing presence whose strength is linked to the original spiritual inheritance. His role as “a little healer” depends on the survival of cultural beliefs that colonial regimes often rejected as irrational or primitive.

Therefore, *LaRose's* spiritual rituals challenge colonial law by showing that justice cannot be reduced to legal punishment. The sweat house, the tobacco offering, the pipe ritual, the medicine package, and the spirit helpers all express a system of moral knowledge. It helps characters move from revenge to atonement and from individual guilt to collective healing. In this sense, Erdrich presents indigenous spirituality as a form of sovereignty: it gives the community the power to define justice, responsibility, and reform through its own traditions.

In conclusion, *LaRose*'s spiritual rituals are central to the novel's treatment of justice and sovereignty. It creates a moral space outside colonial legal authority, where the Ojibwe can respond to tragedy through prayer, sacrifice, kinship, and healing. Through these rituals, Erdrich shows that Indigenous sovereignty is not only political; it is also moral, spiritual, and cultural. The novel finally suggests that true justice requires more than law: it requires a living moral tradition capable of restoring balance after loss.

4.5 Narrative polyphony as cultural resistance in Louise Erdrich's novel *LaRose*

In Louise Erdrich's novel *LaRose*, narrative polyphony functions as a form of cultural resistance because the novel refuses to organize the original experience through a single authoritarian voice. Instead, Erdrich constructs the narrative through multiple voices, memories, perspectives, and family stories. This polyphonic structure is important because colonial narratives often reduce Indigenous groups to silence, victimhood, or legal categories. In contrast, *LaRose* allows different indigenous and non-indigenous voices to speak, remember, suffer, misunderstand, and heal. In this way, narrative polyphony becomes more than a stylistic technique; it becomes a cultural way of resisting erasure.

The idea of polyphony can be understood through Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the polyphonic novel. Bakhtin argues that the polyphonic novel contains "a multiplicity of independent and unintegrated voices and consciousnesses" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6). This concept is useful for reading *LaRose* because Erdrich does not give the reader a single, definitive, and dominant explanation for the tragedy. Dusty Ravich's accidental death is seen through Landreaux's guilt, Nola's grief, Emmaline's patience, Peter's pain, Maggie's anger, *LaRose*'s innocence, and the ancestral memory of earlier *LaRoses*. These voices do not simply repeat the same truth. Rather, each voice carries a different emotional and cultural meaning.

The novel begins from Landreaux's perspective, but even this beginning is not just personal. Landreaux is described as "a devout Catholic who also followed traditional ways," man "thank one god in English" and "put down tobacco for another god in Ojibwe" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 3). This sentence immediately presents a multi-voiced cultural world: Catholic language, Ojibwe ritual, English, Ojibwe, hunting, land, and prayer all exist together. Erdrich does not present original identity as pure, simple, or monistic. Rather, it presents it as multi-layered and dialogical. This multi-layered voice resists colonial simplification because it shows that indigenous life cannot be understood by just one religious, legal, or cultural system.

Polyphony is also evident through the structure of the novel. The table of contents divides the novel into sections such as "Two Houses," "Take It All", "Wolfred & *LaRose*", "1,000 Kills", and "The Gathering" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 11). These sections move between the present and the past,



between the Iron and Ravich families, and between contemporary trauma and ancestral memory. The structure itself resists linear colonial history. Instead of presenting history as a straight forward movement, Erdrich presents memory as circular, returning, and collective. This is consistent with critical debates about Erdrich's narrative. Shilaja argues that Erdrich's narratives use oral narrative and multiple voices to preserve Native American cultural values and ideas (Shilaja, 2017, pp. 93–94).

One of the clearest examples of cultural resistance appears in LaRose's ancestral act of writing her name in boarding school spaces. She says:

“I wrote my name for all of us” (Erdrich, 2016, p. 134).

This quote is short but very powerful. The speaker does not write only for herself; rather, she writes for a collective Aslani presence. The act of writing becomes a counter-history of colonial institutions that attempted to erase indigenous names, languages, and identities. The novel shows that names are left in boarding schools “all the way back to the first school, Carlisle”, and that “the history of LaRose is tied up in those schools” (Erdrich, 2016, p. 134). Here polyphony becomes resistant because the hidden voices of the previous LaRoses remain within the very institutions that were designed to silence them. The voice remains a secret, waiting to be remembered.

For this reason, *LaRose's* narrative polyphony is linked to Indigenous sovereignty. Sovereignty is not just legal or political; it is also narrative. A group maintains its sovereignty when it reserves the right to tell its stories, name its wounds, and remember its past. Leah K argues. Jurss That for indigenous peoples, stories include ancient stories, renewed traditional stories, and stories emerging from contemporary struggles; This telling helps shape tribal governance and keeps tribal history from being lost (Jurss, 2017, pp. 157–158). This idea helps explain LaRose: Erdrich's many voices create a narrative space in which Ojibwe memory and moral knowledge remain active despite colonial pressure.

The child "LaRose" himself is also a polyphonic character. He carries more than one family, more than one history, and more than one emotional responsibility. When Emmaline tries to keep him fully with her, LaRose responds with painful maturity: “You just pass me around”, but then insists: “I got his family on my hands, too” (Erdrich, 2016, pp. 246–247). This child's voice is crucial because it reveals what adults cannot fully say. LaRose understands that he belongs to both families, and his words express the novel's broader pluralistic morality: no one family, no one grief, no one truth can own the whole story. His voice resists adult silence by naming the emotional burden placed on him.

Thus, *LaRose's* narrative polyphony functions as cultural resistance in several ways. First, it resists colonial silence by allowing ancestral family histories and voices to return. Second, he resists legal reductionism by

showing that justice cannot be understood solely through formal law or individual guilt. Third, it combats historical erasure by linking contemporary trauma to the memory of older Indigenous schools of residence and survival. Finally, he resists one dominant fact by allowing different voices to remain in dialogue.

In conclusion, *LaRose* uses narrative polyphony to protect cultural memory and affirm Indigenous sovereignty. Erdrich's many voices do not create confusion; they create a collective truth. Through Landreaux, Emmaline, Nola, Maggie, LaRose, and the previous LaRoses, the novel becomes a space in which the original experience is not spoken of from the outside, but expressed from the inside. Therefore, this polyphonic structure is a form of cultural resistance: it restores presence where colonial history attempted to erase, and transforms storytelling into an act of survival.

Conclusion

This study examines Louise Erdrich's novel *LaRose* through interconnected themes of restorative justice, collective memory, family history, spiritual ritual, moral sovereignty, and narrative polyphony. Unlike the traditional legal narrative that addresses harm primarily through guilt, punishment, and institutional closure, *LaRose* presents justice as a difficult process of atonement, relational responsibility, and collective healing. The accidental murder of Dusty Ravich by the Landreaux Iron creates a wound that only the law can repair. Although the tragedy can be understood through a Western legal framework based on responsibility and punishment, Erdrich shifts the focus to an Indigenous moral system in which justice depends on sacrifice, kinship, memory, and the restoration of balance.

The research showed that restorative justice is the central moral structure of the novel. Landreaux and Emmaline's decision to give their son LaRose to Peter and Nola Ravich represents an original form of compensation rooted in "the old way" (Erdrich, 2016). This act does not erase Dusty's death, nor does it offer simple forgiveness. Rather, it forces the two families to remain connected through grief and responsibility. In this sense, *LaRose* challenges the logic of punitive justice and suggests that some forms of harm require more than legal judgment. As Ibarrola-Armendariz argues, the novel explores collective grief, transgenerational trauma, revenge, and acts of reparation, showing that healing must heal emotional and collective wounds, as well as legal responsibility (Ibarrola-Armendariz, 2023).

Collective memory and family history are also essential to the meaning of the novel. The name "LaRose" connects the modern child with previous



generations, particularly indigenous women whose lives carry histories of survival, suffering, and spiritual endurance. Through this recurring name, Erdrich transformed family history into a living archive of Indigenous memory. The novel therefore resists colonial erasure by preserving names, stories, rituals, and lineages that colonial institutions tried to suppress. This is particularly important in relation to the history of residential schools, where indigenous identity was often targeted for erasure. By reliving these memories, *LaRose* shows that indigenous sovereignty remains not only through political institutions, but also through remembered traditions, family stories, and inherited responsibilities.

Spiritual rituals also reinforce the novel's representation of moral sovereignty. Sweat house rituals, tobacco offerings, pipe rituals, medicine pack, and spirit helpers are not presented as decorative cultural elements. It forms a moral framework within which the characters seek guidance after the tragedy. These rituals allow the Ojibwe to define justice according to their own spiritual and cultural values. In this way, moral sovereignty in *LaRose* means the community's right to decide the meaning of responsibility, healing, and balance from within its own traditions. This reading supports the message's broader argument that Erdrich's literature not only represents colonial law as a legal system; it also reveals fundamentalist alternatives to that system.

The research also argued that narrative polyphony functions as cultural resistance. Erdrich does not allow a single voice to dominate the novel. Instead, build the narrative through multiple perspectives, memories, and family histories. This polyphonic structure resists colonial narratives that often silence the original experience or reduce it to the victim. Bakhtin's idea of polyphony as "a multiplicity of independent and unintegrated sounds" helps explain how Erdrich's narrative gives space to Landreaux's guilt, Nola's grief, Emmaline's patience, *LaRose*'s healing role, and the ancestral sounds of earlier *LaRoses* (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6). Through these voices, the novel becomes a space for cultural survival and original self-representation.

Overall, *LaRose* is a powerful example of how Erdrich reimagined justice outside colonial legal structures. The novel does not deny the importance of law, but it reveals its limits when confronted with original grief, memory, and collective harm. Justice in *LaRose* is not achieved through punishment alone; it emerges through compensation, narrative, ritual, kinship, and the survival of original memory. Therefore, the novel strongly supports the main argument of this message: Erdrich's literature presents tribal sovereignty not only as a legal or political issue but also as a cultural, moral, and narrative practice. In *LaRose*, indigenous sovereignty lives on

through the group's ability to remember, heal, tell its own stories, and define justice on its own terms.

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