
Molly Fuller, "Border Transgression and the Quest for Justice in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*

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Abstract

A Native American reservation is an enclosed, marginalized space, much like an island in a sea of grass; it is also the site of legal boundaries that both comprise and compromise the sovereignty and justice systems of indigenous people who live there. In Louise Erdrich's novel *The Round House*, the rape of Ojibwe Geraldine Coutts by a white man—a transgression of her body, a metaphor for the reservation itself—is complicated by what Erdrich herself, in her afterword, calls "a jigsaw puzzle of state, federal and tribal territories, each with different laws and different officials empowered to enforce them" that posits boundaries of justice. To appropriately decode the complexity of the situation, Erdrich puts Joe Coutts, Geraldine's 13-year-old son, in the narrative subject position. *The Round House* focuses on Joe's coming of age as he discerns the problematic legal complications that keep his mother's rapist immune from legal action, leading to Joe's decision to kill the white man who raped his mother. Through the process of solidarity, Erdrich is able to create empathy for the colonized other as Joe struggles with the moral and ethical dilemma of how justice might possibly supersede the act of taking the life of another human. Ultimately, Joe's quest for justice transcends the boundaries of the novel and becomes a way for Erdrich to engage the colonizer in the plight of the other. Using border theory and island theory, this presentation will examine how Erdrich problematizes and contests the imposed borders of the reservation through instances of border crossing, boundary complications, and the trauma of border transgressions.

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