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Becoming the Other: Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* and the Issue of Identity for the Native Character Pauline Puyat

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In postcolonial literature racial and ethnic identities are not fixed but are subject to shaping and reshaping. Having been ascribed to and associated with cultural representations, nativity, rewriting of history, and reconstruction of identity, postcolonialism offers a space to discuss the issues of identity in the writings from the margins of the contemporary world. Postcolonial literary productions, more often than not, point to marginalized writers' attempt to preserve their cultures and to ensure continuity. Writing for cultural survival, postcolonial authors focus on the celebration of their liminal status, and, in the process, deconstruct and reconstruct cultural codes and modes of representation. In such a scenario, history, politics, and even culture itself are altered, rediscovered, and reassessed in the voices of those who previously had no voice. Rejecting the unitary, monolithic, and monochromic versions of western textual and cultural discourse, postcolonial authors stress the polyphonic and heteroglossic concepts of a poststructuralist discourse.

Native American literatures from the United States are similar, in their storing history, resuscitating orality in the written text, and countering constructions of natives by the master-narratives. Native authors like Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, Gerald Vizenor, and N. Scott Momaday create texts that communicate the lived experiences of the native peoples from the past and their hopes for the future. But native characters are different from one another in their resistance to or acceptance of assimilation into mainstream culture. One native character reflects some native people's attempts to resist assimilation and to work towards the upkeep of native cultures. But another native character deliberately chooses to become the subjugated mirror image of his or her oppressors, because that choice, to him or her, seems to be the only way for survival. This paper focuses on the second character type, Pauline Puyat, a narrator in Louise Erdrich's novel, *Tracks*. Analysis of Pauline reveals the process of "othering" that a native may undergo in the course of choosing a better or at least different life.

Although writing for a postcolonial readership that comprises both native and non-native readers, as well as writing in English, the language of the hegemonic discourse, native writers remain mainly concerned with clearly describing their indigenous culture. But culture itself, being alive and dynamic, is constantly modified by inside and outside influences. Thus native writers also reflect this ever-changing process of cultural evolution. In other words, although they emphasize the uniqueness of their cultures, native writers do not blindfold themselves to changing historical, political and cultural phenomena of native societies as they intersect with the outside world.

Living in a world of altered stories and values, young natives often find themselves in a fragmented world. Deprived of their land, their languages, their religion, their families, and influenced by the colonizer's version of virtues and success, native youths often undergo a transformation that would seemingly serve as an escape route from their marginal status and earn them a place in the oppressor's world. Towards that end, these young natives discard the communities and traditions they were born into and thus move away from their indigenous identities.

Pauline is one such character. Pauline speaks from a space in between two worlds. Her voice is marked by oppression from within, which debilitates her in two ways. On one hand, it works to depreciate her self. On the other hand, it manifests itself in her excessive enthusiasm and loyalty to the other's world by a deliberate forgetfulness of the past. As Greg Sarris points out, "Internalized oppression cuts a wide swath. The oppression that occurred during the colonial period has been internalized by the oppressed in ways that the oppressed in the postcolonial period can become agents of their oppression and destruction. Ironically and inadvertently we work to complete what the oppressor began" (Sarris 134).

As one in struggle with her native identity and with an intense desire and effort to become the other, Pauline's narrative is addressed to no one in particular, thus stressing her acceptance of the colonial written word, rather than reliance on the native oral tradition. Like the colonizer, Pauline indulges in the "improvisation of truth," but at the same time, like the Chippewa tribe she is from, she believes in the power of Missipeshu and Fleur Pillager. At pains to become "white," though all the people who matter in her life are Native, Pauline is Erdrich's portrayal of the devastating possibility of a conflict of cultural codes. In her fanatical rejection of her own self, Pauline takes pride in the fact that the Chippewa talk to her in English rather than in the Native tongue, and in her unlearning of skills integral to Native life, like the quillwork or tanning of hides–her family was "skinners in the clan for which the name was lost" (Erdrich

14). For Pauline, survival translates into denial of one's own tradition and roots. She said, "I wanted to be like my mother, who showed her half-white. I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian. That was because even as a child I saw that to hang back was to perish. I saw through the eyes of the world outside of us. I would not speak our language" (Erdrich 14).

Pauline's desire for assimilation tortures her, and she becomes violent and destructive. Her stories are intended to reflect the disintegration and fragmentation of the native sense of self and community. She is powerful in her own way, but her powers are channelled towards negation and erosion of native culture. She seeks to negate her native past and squelch the possibility of a native future.

Pauline's discomfort in water points to her being uncomfortable in the waters of native culture. She resists her body's natural urge to urinate, in an attempt to negate the presence of native culture within her. As a symbolic act of native culture cleansing itself of the devastating effects of colonialism and assimilation, Fleur cleans Pauline and washes her. But Pauline warns herself "not to experience any pleasure" (Erdrich 154). By denying herself the pleasure of the "wash," Pauline negates enjoying the experience of native culture. Though she gives in to the soothing experience of native culture, it is only temporary: "Fleur poured a pitcher of warm water over me and then began to shampoo my head and hair. I think I fell asleep, lost awareness, let the water course over me and let the hands on my hips, my throat, my back, my breasts, the cupped hands under my chin and around my feet, break me down" (Erdrich 154-155). But soon after, Pauline returns to the convent and thus to the colonized experience. She says, "I felt no jealousy or zeal. I purified myself and then very quietly, returned" (Erdrich 155).

Meanwhile Pauline's "white" Christian dreams lead her on a path towards insanity and self-denial. Her distorted sexuality, her discomfort with the positive forces of birth and creation, and a half-formed sense of identity that is "invisible" even to herself, contribute to her practice of fanatical Catholicism. Pauline seeks refuge in an alien religion that has nothing to comfort her. Pauline's denial of her own race and religion doubly uproots her. As Nanapush, another narrator in Tracks, and the voice of tribal integrity and tradition, would say about Pauline, she is "good at easing souls into death but bad at breathing them into life, afraid of life in fact" (Erdrich 57). As Pauline grows in her power, Fleur, the traditional Anishinabe, loses ground. Though Fleur is able to give birth to a healthy child in spite of Pauline's presence during her first child labor, she loses her second child under Pauline's influence.

A sense of loss and rootlessness pervades Pauline's narrative. Caught between two worlds and belonging to neither, Pauline is simultaneously native and not native. A destructive offspring of forced acculturation, Pauline tells stories that resonate with frustration and confusion. Her private miracle of witnessing the virgin's tears also takes her to a trip of the land of the Chippewa dead. Her stories slander Fleur. Her medicine on Eli provokes a feud that would surpass generations. With her quasi-comical claim of becoming a visionary and the savior of Christ, Pauline shows a twisted sense of spirituality. Even in her attempts to let go of her native identity, Pauline paradoxically gets more and more entangled in the lives of the Chippewa, causing and facilitating fragmentation and devastation. Describing Pauline as "a caricature of the marginal person," Sidner Larson argues, "Pauline's interpretation of experience is presented as dual and irreconcilable; she is not allowed to privilege one religious code or to synthesize the two as a form of resolution. Instead, Pauline is placed in a permanent state of irresolution—she is crazy. The manifestation of her craziness, fuelled by Catholicism, is clearly destructive" (Larson 10-11).

Pauline's power, like her narrative, stinks of lie and treachery. It is the power of an antagonist within native culture. During Fleur's delivery of her first child, a bear enters the house. Seeing the bear, Fleur rises up with fear and gives birth to Lulu. The bear then leaves, but leaves no tracks, suggesting that it might have been a Chippewa spirit bear that had come to facilitate the childbirth. Pauline shoots the bear, wounding it, but it escapes. This, according to Shawn Vidmar, establishes Pauline as an oppressed and colonized native: "Knowing her tribe's belief in the bear spirit, it is odd that Pauline attempted to kill such a powerful totem with the modern tool, a gun. She is a good example of the colonized Indian" (Vidmar).

As the story of a mixed-blood narrator, Pauline's narrative is complicated, reflecting both her cowardice and her desire. She has no particular audience, but tells her story to whoever will listen (Vigderman 166). Pauline's story should be seen one representative mixed-bloods, lost between two worlds and rejected in both.

It is interesting that Nanapush, a Chippewa male, not only respects femininity, but he himself exhibits certain maternal qualities. Meanwhile, paradoxically, Pauline distances herself from all powers of creation in her job as the keeper of the dead and even denies herself motherhood. In her adoption of the male-dominated religion of Christianity, Pauline denies her own femininity. Thus, Pauline not only denies her own tribe and religion but also her gender (Sanders). In an attempt to become whatever she is not, Pauline loses whatever she has

been. In an exhibition of utter self-hatred, Pauline even violates her own body by attempting to kill her unborn child. Meldan Tanrısal observes, "By turning against motherhood, she turns against life. Christianity makes her anti-mother and anti-Indian. She serves as a counter to traditional ways" (Tanrısal 74).

Pauline's rejection of her own self, a consequence of cultural alienation that starts with her rejection of her child, is further distorted in her fanatical practices of self-abnegation for the sake of Catholic salvation. In her strange attempts to perform saintly acts, such as wearing potato skin undergarments for days on end so that she might suffer as Christ suffered, and in her growing wickedness, Pauline seeks "devotion's air" (Erdrich 153). Her perverted sexuality also seems to be resulting from a confused juggling between worlds. From her sexual experience with Napoleon Morrissey to her bearing his child and ultimately her murder of Napoleon, Pauline's story becomes an oppressed native's "tragic parody" (Whitson 189). In her erasure of her own native past and thus native history as such, Pauline functions as an agent of hegemonic forces in her personal whitewashing of native facts. At the end of the novel, Pauline's negation is complete with her rejection of the name given by her family and her adoption of a new convent assigned name, Leopolda. This act symbolizes Pauline's ultimate disconnection with her past. Nancy J. Peterson remarks, "Pauline's assimilation into the dominant culture results in a voice that echoes hegemonic history. Moreover, by forgetting the past and radically rewriting her own identity and experience, Pauline signifies history as pure fiction with no referential value whatsoever—a position that Erdrich's work ultimately rejects" (Peterson 990). To add to Peterson's argument, Tracks obviously conveys that Pauline's stories are unreliable and distorted. Nanapush would say of Pauline that "she was born a liar, and sure to die one," (Erdrich 53) and thus bears responsibility for denying to herself a Chippewa identity. But in her mixed-breed position, Pauline is also a victim of cultural subjugation.

Pauline knows that while she "hardly rinsed through the white girls' thoughts" (Erdrich 115), she is also the "crow of the reservation" who lived off the scraps of the Chippewa people. Further, her bestiality also seems to have grown out of her jealousy of Fleur's beauty and power. Throughout her narrative, one of Pauline's constant motives is to negate Fleur's charm. Possessed by her own violent machinations and sexual jealousy, Pauline seems to have derived a voyeuristic pleasure in witnessing Fleur's rape and later in her act of tricking Eli, Fleur's lover, into a bewitched act of lovemaking with Sophie, the young and dull-witted Morrissey. While she attempts unsuccessfully to kill Fleur's bear power during her first pregnancy, Pauline succeeds in complicating Fleur's

second pregnancy and thus almost causes the death of Fleur's child, resulting in Fleur's losing of some of her mythical Pillager power.

Pauline, destructively powerful on her own, also spreads gossip regarding Fleur being the mistress of Missipeshu, the Chippewa water monster. But death seems to be at Pauline's command and her magic, unlike Nanapush's, results in destruction. Even though the truthfulness of her narrative is questionable, Pauline is the one who narrates Fleur's rape. She also refers to her own birdlike qualities more than once in the text. In her first job as a keeper of the dead, Pauline is found "in the tree later that morning," while "everyone was shot with fear at the way I [Pauline] hung, precarious, above the ground" (Erdrich 68). And in her first sexual experience she says that she did not like the sight of her having been "naked, skinned, plucked." Brehm points out that "Pauline appears to belong to the bird clan, the creature of the air who challenges Micipiju's power, but Pauline is more Windigo [a native monster with destructive powers] than Thunderbird" (Brehm 695).

Pauline's hallucinatory world is filled with acts of destruction. More importantly, she is quick to shift her own guilty acts to others, especially Fleur. While she spreads the story of Fleur's rape, Fleur's pregnancy resulting from the rape and Fleur's revenge of killing her rapists, the reader later comes to know from Pauline's narrative itself that it was Pauline and not Fleur who sentenced the three rapists to their cold deaths in the town of Argus.

Pauline's acts of destruction do not stop at destroying others. Her negativity results in a mortification of her own self as well. If Nanapush's narrative voice ensures the representation of native culture and orality, Pauline's self-representation is bound in the written word and hence her stories are aligned to the convent, Christianity and the advantages of being on the right side of time. In her search for an identity, Pauline, however, loses her "self" and her "name" in her redefinition/rechristening in the hegemonic discourse, "I asked for the grace to accept, to leave Pauline behind, to remember that my name, any name, was no more than a crumbling skin. *Leopolda*. I tried out the unfamiliar syllables. They fit, they cracked in my ears like a fist through ice" (Erdrich 205).

By breaking away from her tribal identity, and the native tradition of oral storytelling, Pauline's narrative demonstrates the loss of native culture and values in the contemporary times. Unlike Nanapush, who has Lulu to listen to his stories and at times physically respond to it, Pauline's stories do not have an audience. But like the colonizing forces, who have wielded the power of

the written word, Pauline is conscious of the reader and her stories are hence directed to them. Rita Ferrari argues, "Erdrich thus calls attention to Pauline's language as spoken/written into a void. Pauline is conscious of the significance of representation and her existence as text. She wishfully projects her continued existence not in tribal legend but in written hagiography" (Ferrari).

Pauline's narrative ends at a point when she is sure that "the land will be sold and divided" and "Fleur's cabin will tumble into the ground and be covered by leaves." Further, she also becomes a teacher at a convent school in Argus, where she can contribute to the oppressor's mission of "blinding" and "deafening" the native child: "I have vowed to use my influence to guide them, to purify their minds, to mold them in my own image" (Erdrich 205). Peterson remarks, "Pauline recognizes that indoctrination into white culture is a kind of mutilation—her students will be 'blinded' and 'deafened' as she herself has been—but she sees this development as inevitable. The White Christian capitalists will win the cultural-epistemological war, in Pauline's view, and she will side with the victor" (980).

But by denying her the first and last chance of narration in the text and by frequently emphasizing her lies, Erdrich denies Pauline authority, credibility and continuity. Pauline, Erdrich seems to suggest, is a realistic character within the contemporary Chippewa experience, but she does not have the first and last word on native cultural continuity.

Pauline's description portrays Fleur as a near-mythical figure, but Pauline's unreliability as a narrator also challenges the authenticity of her description. We know that Pauline has a habit of shifting guilt—there are at least two instances in the novel to suggest so. It is Pauline who locks Fleur's rapists inside the freezer in the butcher shop in Argus and then spreads the story among the townspeople blaming Fleur for the deaths. And it is Fleur who is rumored to have killed Napoleon Morrissey with the help of Missipeshu, although we know that it is actually Pauline who killed Napoleon in her hallucination mistaking him for the water monster.

Paradoxically, it is through Pauline's narrative that much of Fleur's stories surface. Again, in spite of Fleur's apparent powers, it is Pauline who avenges Fleur's rape by murdering her rapists. Much of Fleur's sexuality is also established through Pauline's stories. By thus describing to us a traditional Chippewa like Fleur, Pauline perhaps unconsciously manifests the remnants of her Chippewa self that attempts to resist her own othering. But the resistance is too weak to overcome the lure of being on the side of the powerful.

As she searches for a place in the world of the other, Pauline herself becomes more and more the other. Interestingly, in spite of having thrown away her race, religion and community, Pauline does not survive. That she has to take a new name to seek survival suggests that assimilation is not a wise option for the native peoples. While Pauline's presence inside a Native American text is Erdrich's way of showing contemporary postcolonial realities, by depicting Pauline as a failure, *Tracks* resists the endorsement of the colonizer's ways. In fact, it seems to suggest that while becoming the other could result in survival of a certain kind, the price the marginalized person might have to pay for such survival would negate any chance of an identity for her. Moreover, although in the postcolonial atmosphere identities are continuously negotiated and manipulated, Pauline's complete alteration to fit herself into the discourse of a master culture shows there are limits to this negotiation imposed by one's ethnic or racial background, and pursuit of a better life in fact hardly guarantees resolution of the issues and problematics of postcolonial identity.

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