
Influences of Minority and Dominant Cultural History in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*

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In *Tracks*, Louise Erdrich presents two characters, Fleur and Pauline, whose lives parallel one another. Both are women ostracized from their community and mothers and lovers to both a human being and a supernatural being. Because each of them occupies a similar position socially, culturally, and spiritually, they react to the destructive forces facing their community in similar ways. They attempt to gain control over the situation by using their supernatural powers. However, Erdrich characterizes Fleur's actions with a sense of autonomy, while Pauline's are subject to her depraved admiration for Fleur. Where Fleur attempts to save the community by aligning herself with traditional Anishinabe spiritual forces, Pauline takes the conventional Christian God as her own, separating herself from her community. She is the bastardized version of Fleur. Erdrich presents these two versions of the same character to show the dangers of not adapting to new circumstances (Fleur) or adapting blindly and incoherently (Pauline). Erdrich shows these two characters residing on either side of accepting/rejecting their shared culture in order to draw the reader into thinking about everyone that stands in between. The multiple perspectives draw the reader into seeing what it means to have an individual history that contradicts with the larger version of "History." The splintering of both Fleur, a character who chooses to be defined completely by her Anishinabe history, and Pauline, a character who chooses to be defined completely by the dominant culture's history or "History," illustrates the disparity of the two choices. Erdrich advocates the necessity for the community to find a healthy balance or face obliteration by either absolute choice.

Fleur and Pauline are a part of a community confronted with change due to an invading culture. Nanapush describes it as a "wind from the east, bringing exile in a storm of government papers" (Erdrich 1). In describing these outside forces as "wind," Erdrich expresses the irrepressible and uncontrollable nature of the circumstances the Anishinabe are forced to grapple with. Prior to this, they were an autonomous group of people. As the years progress and the dominant culture begins its oppression via "government papers" or treaties, it is the end of the Anishinabe world as they know it. These outside forces cause such an intense disruption that Lawrence William Gross argues that the Anishinabe are living in a post-apocalyptic time. The Anishinabe community Erdrich presents is one that reflects stress, dysfunction, and a general feeling of depression. The end of the traditional Anishinabe forces characters to cope with and develop new ways of life.

Fleur avoids adjusting to the invading ideas of the dominant culture by adhering strictly to her Anishinabe culture. When faced with conflict, she resorts to calling upon the gods of the Anishinabe, namely Misshepesu. Erdrich describes Fleur's relationship with Misshepesu as a sort of marriage. Throughout the book it is apparent that Fleur draws her strength and power from this water spirit - she lives near the lake in which

Misshepesu resides, she can cause storms, she drowns herself and trades her death for somebody else's life.

Erdrich characterizes Fleur's environment as an important spiritual site for the Anishinabe. Nanapush states, "Pillager land was not ordinary land to buy and sell. When that family came here, driven from the east, Misshepesu had appeared because of the Old Man's connection. But the water thing was not a dog to follow at our heels" (175). The exceptional bond between the god and the Pillagers is shown by the fact that he did not forsake them during their time of distress; when the government relocated them to a reservation, Misshepesu followed them. Erdrich indicates numerous times the integral connection Fleur has with the water god by describing her as wearing a "dress, drenched, wrapped like a transparent sheet. A skin of lakeweed," having eyes "black as lake stones," her presence leaves "a taste of cool wind" (22; 212; 120). By describing her as having attributes associated with water, Erdrich solidifies the reader's understanding that she is Misshepesu's disciple. The connection between the two, while unexplainable and perhaps unbelievable to the audience, are explicit and should be accepted in the novel's context.

It is the bond between Misshepesu and Fleur Pillager that makes many of her incredible feats possible. As a young girl, Fleur uses her powers to gamble against a group of men, winning only one dollar each time she plays them. Because Fleur wins only one dollar every time she gambles with these men, Erdrich shows the extent of Fleur's powers. She could easily have written Fleur in as winning the pot of money completely, but showing the meticulous manner in which she wins shows the extent of the control she has over her power.

The acute authority with which Fleur uses her powers is exemplified again, later to generate a storm that ends up killing the men with whom she gambled because one attempts to rape her and the others do nothing to stop it. Fleur is constantly described as a beautiful young woman, but men stay away from her because Misshepesu claims her. When one of the gambling men attempts to rape her, he is basically calling for his own death. The storm Fleur conjures is described as "a fair-minded disaster, no one could be said to have suffered much more than the next, except for Koska's Meats," where Fleur, the rapist, and the other gamblers were employed (29). Because no location but the one in which the trouble started has any damage, the reader infers that Fleur caused the damage and the deaths of the men because of their actions.

It is her relationship with Misshepesu and the powers she derives from that relationship that drive her community to exclude her. Beginning in her childhood, the majority of the Anishinabe community is afraid of her because of her intimacy with death and apparent ability to call it. The deaths of Jean Hat, his fishing buddy, and later George Many Women (after saving her from the lake) make it apparent to the community that she can trade her death for somebody else's life. Each of these men has a hand in saving Fleur from drowning in the lake where Misshepesu lives.

Though it seems ungrateful of Fleur to take the lives of those who save her, she perceives these men as oppressors. As lumberjacks, these men are demolishing the residence of the spiritual forces that govern the Anishinabe world and the places where

food is hunted and gathered. They contribute to the post-apocalyptic world that she and her community live in because they are instruments in the destruction of the landscape from which the Anishinabe derive their livelihood, both spiritually and culturally. While all the Anishinabe are coming to terms with what it means to live in this new world and how to live in it, she reminds them of the resilience of their past and constancy of their dilemma. James D. Stripes refers to characters surviving amid this plight as having “identities in the cultural borderland,” meaning that they are struggling with the complexity of adapting to the new dominant culture while coming to an understanding of what it means to be Native American (26). Her familiarity with death is a symptom of the strong ties she has with the spiritual realm and, therefore, the strong ties she has with the culture. Because Fleur’s identity is strictly dictated by her place in the Anishinabe cosmos, it is perceived as antagonistic to the new goal of the community: to survive the invading culture.

While Fleur claims her traditional culture and uses it to fight against those oppressing her, Pauline aligns with anything but traditional culture. As a young girl, she rejects her heritage, stating, “I wanted to be like my mother, who showed her half-white. I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian” (14). Her obsession with adhering to the dominant culture eventually drives her to madness. Because she is undeniably mixed – her mother is half-white, her grandfather is Canadian (inevitably both French and Native because there is no such thing as a “pure Canadian”) – Pauline’s goals of emitting an essence of pure white are doomed from the beginning. Rather than identifying herself as something that exists in the present, Pauline imagines an ideal with no basis in either Native culture or French Canadian culture. Her failure to construct her identity in a constructive way based on the climate of change surrounding her community leave her forever struggling with who she is in reference to the situation.

Once Pauline interacts with Fleur an incredible shift occurs. Pauline still tries to attain her original objective, but she recognizes that she, too, has power. During the storm Fleur summons, Pauline shuts the door on a group of men taking refuge in the freezer. Consequently, they freeze to death. Erdrich leaves this point open to interpretation because as Pauline is narrating the occurrence, she switches back and forth from taking credit for closing the freezer door purposely and shutting it accidentally. The reader recognizes that at this point Pauline has found her voice and independence.

It is still questionable at this point, however, whether she closes the door on the men as an act of support or rivalry. She may have deliberately closed the door as an advocate for Fleur in order to help kill the men. However, she could just be creating another situation involving the deaths of men that the townspeople will blame on Fleur. Either way, Pauline aligns herself with Fleur. If she is validating Fleur’s actions by helping her, it shows a sense of kinship. If she is hoping to reinforce the townspeople’s unfavorable opinion of Fleur, she creates an alliance with her because both will be outsiders.

Prior to this epiphany, Pauline already recognized the enormity of Fleur’s persona. While “[m]en stayed clear of Fleur Pillager [...] though she was good looking,” men simply “stayed clear” of Pauline because they did not notice her (11). Pauline strives to

create a persona for herself because she has no outstanding physical characteristics. Pauline describes herself as “angles and sharp edges, a girl of bent tin” (71). What should be angles that liken her to a crane and therefore part of the Anishinabe world, Pauline sees as gangly and awkward. Pauline perceives herself as a failure when compared to Fleur. Where Fleur triumphs in beauty and power, Pauline fails at both.

Pauline decides to construct herself into an outstanding and noticeable being by taking a markedly untraditional role. In Susan Perez Castillo’s article, “The Construction of Gender and Ethnicity in the Texts of Leslie Silko and Louise Erdrich,” she surmises that ethnicity and gender are social constructs that can be interpreted in different ways within different communities. It cites both Fleur and Pauline as independent thinkers, unafraid of questioning male authority. While Fleur uses her powers for beating men at gambling and killing those she feels threaten her community, “Pauline’s mysticism may represent a tactic for escaping invisibility in a system which places her beyond representation” as both a woman and a Native American (Castillo 236). Her role as a midwife to death frightens and fragments the community. She is an emblem in the community. Widows usually take this responsibility, and because Pauline is not a widow, her enthusiasm for handling the dead contradicts norms and disturbs an already troubled community. This gives her power and notoriety. Her presence, like Fleur’s, signifies death.

However, rather than inherently having this role as a child like Fleur does, Pauline chooses this role for herself. Many in the community understand Fleur’s position as part of Misshepeshu’s desire and consequently fear her, but Pauline’s role is one of artifice. She likens herself to Fleur in an attempt to be part of the community, but this, like her goal to be “pure Canadian,” is doomed for failure. In a sense, Fleur is part of the community because she is intricately connected with the spirits. The only thing separating her from the community is their fear of her. Pauline is not working within the spiritual realm. Rather, she is working against it by perverting the norms of the community. The only connection she creates with the community is one of fear.

Fleur always had a small community accepting her, her familial community. Pauline joins the convent as an act of impression and defense because she sees Fleur’s family as both welcoming and disturbing. She constantly goes to visit the Pillagers and they clearly accept her into their home each time (joking with her, serving her, etc.). Pauline sees them as “a kind of clan, the new made up of bits of the old, some religious in the old way and some in the new” (70). Their unity is disturbing to her because she is an outsider and “could only look upon them part by part, never wholly, for it seemed that in relation to each other they swelled and shrank” (72). Their fluctuations signify their ability to adapt to the situations unfolding before them – the hostile political and social climate working against them in the town. Her ineptitude to be adopted into the dominant culture is made all the more apparent by their closeness with one another. Instead of perceiving herself as part of this “clan,” their constant sodality reaffirms her sense of isolation.

Pauline joins the convent in an attempt to use mysticism as a means of escaping invisibility. By joining the Catholic Church, she moves to a more powerful position.

Michelle R. Hessler states, “As a member of the reservation community, Pauline is inferior to Fleur, but as a member of the cloister she belongs to the mainstream Christian community which repeatedly dispossesses the Anishinabeg” (42). In deciding to join the convent, Pauline effectively makes herself part of a community. She can now assert her position as equal to Fleur’s.

Once she joins the convent, Pauline’s life is incredibly similar to Fleur’s. While Fleur had her literal family, Pauline finally has a metaphorical one. Not only does she finally belong to a community, but she is also a part of the spiritual world. It is not the same spiritual world from which Fleur derives her power, but it still involves her marrying a spiritual being. While Fleur takes the water god as her spiritual husband, Pauline takes the conventional Christian God as hers.

Pauline has seen Fleur promote and act on a movement against the invading culture multiple times. She simulates Fleur’s exploits for her own crusade. She, like Fleur, uses her spirituality to mar those she feels are impeding on the divine path set forth for her by God. Ironically, it is Fleur who bears the brunt of Pauline’s hostile crusade. Though Fleur is the person Pauline frames her life after, Pauline’s main target is the Pillager family. Pauline’s Catholic spirituality drives her to see Fleur as the Devil’s champion. She believes that “Christ had hidden out of frailty, overcome by the glitter of copper scales, appalled at the creature’s unwinding length and luxury. New devils require new gods” (195). She believes that Christ is too weak to put an end to the evil that Misshepesu brings. Misshepesu is a “new devil” requiring a “new god” to defeat him. She believes that she is this “new god” who will defeat him. It is this belief that propels her destructive intentions towards Fleur Pillager’s family.

The divine right Pauline believes God bestowed on her to obliterate the Pillagers is a guise for her true reasons: the compulsion to be accepted by Fleur. Though Pauline may believe that God truly gave her this mission, Erdrich expresses throughout the book that Pauline wants to be noticed and accepted by Fleur as more than what she is to the rest of the community. After her first interaction with Fleur, Pauline sees herself as being “no more to her than a piece of wall” to her (76). Pauline’s deeds are a desperate attempt to emulate Fleur for her attention. Where at first she mimicked Fleur, Pauline’s final attempts in the novel are twisted into hostility towards Fleur for attention. The origins of Pauline’s actions are rooted in admiration and a need for acceptance.

The sense of isolation Pauline feels, as well as the compulsion for acceptance, is but a symptom of the problems facing the community. While Pauline feels distress from her alienation from Fleur who is an emblem of spirituality in the Anishinabe culture, the Anishinabe are alienated from their culture in general. With the government illegally taxing the Anishinabe for their allotments and re-issuing the land to the highest bidder when these taxes are unable to be paid, many Anishinabe are left to either receive government rations or die of starvation. They are forced off land, away from their people and away from their culture, forcing them to make new lives for themselves. Nanapush sees that “[t]here was no adversary, no betrayer, no one to fight” (207). The Anishinabeg frantically find their place among the changing climate. A nameless, faceless adversary (very different from traditional opponents) challenges them.

The community must be proactive by working within the new system rather than reactive if they are to survive the situation. This is where both Fleur and Pauline fail. Fleur defines herself wholly as Anishinabe. Pauline hopes to be wholly White. Neither can live successfully in the changing environment because, as Stripes quotes Bakhtin, “The fusion of cultural practices, languages, and cosmologies which were once alien to one another results in new forms which resonate formerly useful social dialects, behaviors, and linguistic forms” (29). The dominant culture coalescing with the native culture of the Anishinabe creates a new dialogue, a new way of communicating. To define oneself as completely one culture would discount and demean others to which one actually belongs. Fleur’s qualities as a traditional character against the evolving setting destine her to failure. Pauline’s untraditional attributes that still strive to mimic traditional characteristics destine her to failure as well.

Erdrich points out the necessity that these characters adapt to the changing environment when Nanapush acknowledges that “all [are] attached [...] because they’re hooked from one side to the other, mouth to tail” (46). Because Nanapush is talking about stories being connected to one another, Erdrich expresses the necessity to recognize both cultures in order to survive. The characters Erdrich presents that are successful in adapting are those who gather together and work within the new order (The Morrissey’s and Margaret & Nanapush).

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