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The Fragmentation of a Tribal People in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*

SIDNER LARSON

Louise Erdrich's novel *Tracks* deals with the years between 1912 and 1919, when the North Dakota Chippewa, or Anishinabe, as they call themselves, were coping with the effects of the General Allotment Act of 1887, the purpose of which was to divide tribally allotted lands among individual Indians so that these Indians could leave their nomadic, communal cultures behind and become settled as farmers. After the Indian Allotment Act of 1904, each enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa born before 1909 received one quarter section of land, with single members of the tribe receiving various lesser amounts depending on their age. This was part of the transformation of Indian land into Euro-American property; more significantly, as Mary Jane Schneider has noted in her book *North Dakota Indians*, allotment had the immediate effect of reducing the total acres of Indian land by 65 percent.[1] *Tracks* is in part an autopsy of this process, whereby place becomes property, and an analysis of how the process affects innocent bystanders.

Mixed-blood Indian people occupy a marginal position in an already marginalized culture. In the case of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa, mixed blood has its origins in the historical influence of French and English fur traders on the tribe during the mid-eighteenth century. These traders obtained furs from the Chippewa, who received trade goods in return. This contact was more than economic, however, and resulted in intermarriage between French

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men and Chippewa women. Contact was encouraged by the fur companies as a means of keeping their men content, although most Frenchmen returned to Canada when the fur business declined.[2] The children of these unions were called bois brulés, half-breeds, mixed-bloods, or Métis.

Another large influence on Indian people was the coming of European religions in the early 1800s. Julie Maristuen-Rodakowski, in her article "The Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota," has pointed out that European religion came to the Chippewa in 1817, "when residents of the Red River Colony (Winnipeg) wrote to the Bishop of Quebec asking him to send religious leaders to minister to the Indians."[3] Apparently, this resulted from negative aspects of the fur trade relationship, which brought abuse of alcohol by Indians and French and the abandonment of Indian women and mixed-blood children by Frenchmen. French Catholics responded by establishing schools and convents, accomplished at Turtle Mountain by Father Belcourt in 1885.

Erdrich points out serious problems associated with the coming of Catholicism. For example, in *Love Medicine,* Marie leaves a Catholic convent because of physical abuse. Maristuen-Rodakowski states, "Marie later hears that the Sacred Heart Convent is a place for nuns that didn't get along anywhere else, and she finds some solace in that. So much for the ministering of the Roman Catholics, if this is true."[4]

Louise Erdrich's assertion of abuse may seem controversial, but additional evidence of problems associated with Indian-Catholic relations exists in the writing of other Indian authors. An example is James Welch's *Winter in the Blood,* where the priest from Harlem, Montana, refuses to bury the narrator's grandmother in the family graveyard. The narrator says, "He never buried Indians in their family graveyards; instead, he made them come to him, to his church, his saints and holy water, his feuding eyes."[5] Welch's passage in *Winter in the Blood* is similar to Louise Erdrich's reflection of negative aspects of Catholicism in *Tracks.* James Welch and I are cousins, and we both spent considerable time at our grandparents' ranch on the Fort Belknap Reservation. The perceptions of both Erdrich and Welch are authenticated for me by stories I remember our grandmother telling of drinking and sexual abuse of Gros Ventre females by priests at the St. Paul Mission at Hays, Montana, located at Fort Belknap.

The process by which European religion came to northern tribes such as the Anishinabe and Gros Ventre can be further explained

by a passage from Sister M. Clare Hartmann's *The Significance of the Pipe to the Gros Ventres of Montana*:

> In 1840 Father De Smet was the first missionary to travel through the country in which the Gros Ventres and Assiniboines lived. Father Point (1846–47) and Father Giorda (1862), both Jesuits, visited them periodically. However, President Grant divided the missionary work with the Indians among various sects. Fort Belknap Reservation, the home of the Gros Ventres, was confined to the Methodists. As none of them ever came to take up their work, the Indians were befriended and taken over by the various Jesuit Fathers. In 1883 Father Eberschweiler came to Helena, Montana. On one of his visits to the Gros Ventres they asked for a resident missionary. In 1885 President Cleveland granted permission for the erection of a mission on the Fort Belknap Agency. Father Eberschweiler took up his abode at the agency.[6]

The zeal with which various religious factions must have set about their work is reflected in President Grant's divvying up Indian Territory for them. The fact that the Gros Ventre's assigned ministers never showed up characterizes Gros Ventre luck at the time.

What makes this process so reminiscent of *Tracks* is the fact that the Gros Ventre asked for a resident missionary. They did this because they wished to escape the negative influence of soldiers stationed at Fort Assiniboine near present-day Havre, Montana. This is very similar to the Chippewa of *Tracks*, who are willing to embrace a new religion in return for help in escaping abuses brought to them by the fur traders.

Among the problems associated with Catholicism for Indian people were the ambivalence and tension that resulted when Indian people tried to live with both Native American and Roman Catholic religious beliefs. Knowledge of both was in some ways an advantage, but at other times it had a paralyzing effect resulting from contradictory systems. In "Reading between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich," Catherine Rainwater states,

> In *Tracks*, Erdrich's two narrators likewise struggle with liminality in their efforts to leave behind early lives in favor of others they have chosen. Nanapush grows up Christian in a Jesuit school, but later chooses life in the woods and Chippewa tradition; the other narrator, Pauline, is a mixed-blood raised

> in the Native American tradition, but she wishes to be white and eventually becomes a fanatical nun, constantly at war with the "pagans" who had once been her relatives.[7]

The fragmentation of Indian tribes can be seen as having been accomplished in a number of ways. The introduction of European diseases weakened the tribes sufficiently to make them vulnerable; after that happened, however, the influence of the English and French fur traders, the application of European religions, and political exploitation of mixed-blood people were considerable factors as well.

Intermarriage with fur traders, although generative in certain situations, was also very divisive in at least two powerful ways. Although Indian people were quite accepting of outsiders on some levels, especially as a way of making alliances they saw as advantageous, they still retained a homogeneity at the core of their kinship systems.

An example is research on mixed-bloods done by George Devereux in his book *Mohave Ethnopsychiatry*. Devereux points out that the Mojave have had a cultural fear of aliens, dictating avoidance of all close contact with other tribes and, even more, of intimate connections with alien races. The white race is considered the most dangerous because of its "acquisitiveness." Devereux goes on to say that "the three most intensive forms of physiological interactions--eating, cohabitation, and killing—and the most significant form of psychological interaction—discussing the knowledge acquired in a dream—expose the Mojave to the dangers of foreign contamination."[8]

Within this context, mixed-bloods are considered racially alien and therefore capable of causing full-blood Mojave Indians to contract "the foreign illness," or *Ahwe*, which the Mojave believe can cause death. As a result, mixed-blood infants were sometimes killed, or, if they were permitted to survive, their fate was harsh: They were rejected by their maternal kin and shunned by the rest of the tribe. Although this is perhaps more dramatic than examples of mixed-blood treatment found in *Tracks*, it does suggest foundations of Native American thought that are responsible for tribal organizations being quite strict with regard to identity.

Another example is the fact that mixed-bloods were considered peripheral to tribal government by traditional members. These traditional members were consistently opposed to giving up tribal land and to the process of assimilation into white culture. As a

result, European administrators often turned to the mixed-blood population as a means of gaining enough support to obtain concessions; by proclaiming that mixed-bloods were to have a say in decision-making, white agents were often able to get their way.

In *Mixed Bloods and Tribal Dissolution: Charles Curtis and the Quest for Indian Identity*, William Unrau documents how Charles Curtis, a mixed-blood Kaw, supported assimilationist policies and allotment. Curtis, an attorney and politician, actually authored the 1898 Curtis Act, a precursor to the Allotment Act. Although Curtis envisioned the act as a great progressive measure, its ultimate result was tribal destruction for his people.

One of the ways this tribal destruction was accomplished was to give mixed-blood Kaws voting rights, which they subsequently exercised to overcome traditional views and facilitate allotment of Kaw lands.[9] This exploitation of alienated mixed-bloods represents a primary tension in *Tracks*; it is part of the backdrop against which the characters live their chaotic and confused lives.

The book begins with Nanapush's reflections on the state of affairs among the Chippewa of 1912. In his winter count, he notes that the survivors of displacement and smallpox fought their way west to exile "in a storm of government papers," only to be stricken again, this time by tuberculosis. He considers the belief of some Anishinabe that the trouble is the result of dissatisfied spirits of the dead, then comes to his own conclusion: "Our trouble came from living, from liquor and the dollar bill. We stumbled toward the government bait, never looking down, never noticing how the land was snatched from under us at every step."[10]

Although Nanapush aims toward present reality with his statement, it is not because he is unaware of the influence of the past. He tells how Anishinabe dead can come to coax the living to go with them and how he and Fleur Pillager, a child he has rescued from the tuberculosis epidemic, nearly succumb to their urging. The dead feel it would be better to move on than to live amid the ruin of Indian culture, regarding the living as fools to do so. Nanapush replies,

> And we were. Starvation makes fools of anyone. In the past, some had sold their allotment land for one hundred poundweight of flour. Others, who were desperate to hold on, now urged that we get together and buy back our land, or at least pay a tax and refuse the lumbering money that would sweep the marks of our boundaries off the map like a pattern of straws. Many were determined not to allow the hired

> surveyors, or even our own people, to enter the deepest bush. They spoke of the guides Hat and Many Women, now dead, who had taken the government pay.[11]

With this, Erdrich begins to make a more realistic statement about the seeming passivity of Indian people by personalizing their loss of land. Earlier, I said that what was significant about allotment was that it reduced Indian landholdings by 65 percent. What is even more significant, what goes-without-saying too many times, is that, when the Indian people were coerced into giving up their land, it was at a time when they were literally at the point of starving to death in an environment that provided few alternative means of survival to the hunting culture that was destroyed.

The "bait" that Indian people stumbled toward was meager rations that would enable them to stay alive. Also implicit in the statement, however, is resistance, a determination by some to hold on to the land by the white way of paying money; others took action by calling on the ancient power once possessed by the Pillager Clan, "who knew the secret ways to cure or kill, until their art deserted them."[12] Although some maneuver successfully to retain their land, they are forced to do so as individuals operating largely outside the tribal kinship system; the overall effect is one of further diminishment. What seems more empowering in the long run, though less profitable in the short term, is Nanapush's and Fleur's adherence to traditional ways.

Although Indian people were promised time and again that each land concession would be the last, whites continued to find means for further dispossession. In *Tracks*, although the Anishinabe have been given individual parcels of land by allotment, those parcels are still being taken away for failure to pay taxes. Nanapush complains about this, saying, "As you know, I was taught by the Jesuits . . . . I know about law. I know that 'trust' means they can't tax our parcels."[13] What this means within the context of *Tracks* is that in spite of the fact that the land was held in trust for Indians by the federal government, the states and others could step in and claim it under certain circumstances.

More specifically, Indian tribes are vulnerable to arguments based on legal doctrines such as statutes of limitation and adverse possession, doctrines that amount to a requirement of "use it or lose it" in various circumstances. During the twilight years from the 1880s to the 1960s, when they were virtually paralyzed by

adversity, tribes often failed to exercise rights they would have had commensurate with federal recognition as separate but equal entities. These patterns of "nonuser," in legal parlance, or non-use by Indians, created powerful equities for governments and private landowners who ruled on or occupied lands more or less by default. It appears that the seizure of land for failure to pay property taxes referred to in *Tracks* stems from this, a practice finally struck down by the Supreme Court in the 1976 Minnesota case *Bryan v. Itasca County* (426 U. S. 373 [1976]).

In conjunction with this practice, land was apparently resold at auction after being seized. Nector Kashpaw, in a moment of realization, reiterates,

> If we don't pay they'll auction us off! Damien nodded, went on, ignoring Margaret's shocked poke at her knowledgeable son. Edgar Pukwan Jr. and the Agent control the choosing of the board who will decide who may bid on what foreclosed parcels and where.[14]

Erdrich sets up the Morisseys as an example of those who have profited by buying allotments others have lost to taxes: "They were well-off people, mixed-bloods who profited from acquiring allotments that many old Chippewa did not know how to keep."[15] Excluded from certain aspects of tribal society as they were, mixed-blood people clearly felt that some losses suffered by traditional people represented opportunities for them. In addition, consistent with the strong matriarchal strain in northern tribes, Bernadette Morrissey is the leader of the Morrisseys, and, as long as she is in charge, they prosper. Again, this is similar to James Welch's *Winter in the Blood,* where the narrator remarks, "We passed Emily Short's fields, which were the best in the valley. They had been leveled by a reclamation crew from the agency. Emily was on the tribal council."[16] In *Tracks,* when Bernadette is faced with adversity, she reacts immediately: "In a week, with her cleanliness, her methodical handwriting, and her way with sums, she had found a way to save her land. In spite of the first consumptive signs in her lungs, Bernadette kept house for the Agent, reorganized his property records, and mailed debt announcements to every Indian in arrears."[17] Bernadette is obviously a very capable individual; it is also clear, however, that her success is gained in large part at the expense of other Indian people.

Bernadette's success is limited in other ways as well. Like Teresa in *Winter in the Blood,* although she has won the battle to prosper

individually, she is losing the war, in the sense that her family is in disarray. Her children, Clarence and Sophie, both marry no-account Lazarres and descend on her like a swarm of locusts, whereupon she leaves them on the farm and moves to town.

The significance of family for Indian people has been articulated by Janine Windy Boy-Pease in the 1985 Rattlesnake Productions film *Country Warriors: A Story of the Crow Tribe*: "But you know Crows measure wealth a little differently than non-Indians . . . . Wealth is measured by one's relatedness, one's family, and one's clan. To be alone, that would be abject poverty to a Crow." By isolating herself, Bernadette has allowed herself to become a shadow of property; as a consequence, she contributes to the colonization of the tribe and then, in turn, is colonized by her own children, who, without her guidance, fall into decadence.

On the other hand, Nanapush, representing the traditional Anishinabe, seeks to remain aligned with tribal tradition as much as possible. Although he is made to bend, he does not break, remaining perhaps the most empowered figure throughout the book:

> The Captain and then the lumber president, the Agent and at last many of our own, spoke long and hard about a cash agreement. But nothing changed my mind. I've seen too much go by—unturned grass below my feet, and overhead, the great white cranes flung south forever. I know this. Land is the only thing that lasts life to life. Money burns like tinder, flows off like water. And as for government promises, the wind is steadier. I am a holdout, like the Pillagers, although I told the Captain and the Agent what I thought of their papers in good English. I could have written my name, and much more too, in script. I had a Jesuit education in the halls of Saint John before I ran back to the woods and forgot all my prayers.[18]

In fact, much of Nanapush's power derives from language. His entire narrative in *Tracks* is told in the form of a story to Lulu, his adopted daughter. This device is particularly striking to me, because it reminds me of my grandmother talking incessantly at me when I was very young. She made it a point to tell me in detail things one might think would be lost on a youngster. In order to get me to sit still for this, she resorted to things like making my grandfather saddle up a sawhorse in the kitchen so I would listen while she cooked and talked. I did not think much about it at the time, but I know the value of the stories now. Like Nanapush with

Lulu, someone took the time to tell me who I am, and why, and that is valuable.

Nanapush emphasizes the value of storytelling throughout the book. He tells how he saved his own life during the smallpox epidemic by starting a story: "I fainted, lost breath, so that I could hardly keep moving my lips. But I did continue and recovered. I got well by talking. Death could not get a word in edgewise, grew discouraged, and traveled on."[19] After he rescues Fleur and the spirits of the Pillagers come for them, it is talking that revives him again: "My voice rasped at first when I tried to speak, but then, oiled by strong tea, lard and bread, I was off and talking . . . I began to creak and roll. I gathered speed. I talked both languages in streams that ran alongside each other, over every rock, around every obstacle. The sound of my own voice convinced me I was alive."[20]

Nanapush's verbal ability works on other levels as well. He sees himself as a talker and a hunter and as someone who can wound with jokes. This gives him a powerful tool to deal with things as they happen. He is a ladies' man who casts a verbal spell on Margaret Kashpaw after she comes to his cabin to upbraid him for giving her son love medicine to use on Fleur. He suggests to Margaret at one point that he finally may have lost his virility, and she replies, "As long as your voice works, the other will."[21] There is a recognition of power in Margaret's statement as well as a wonderful evocation of what it can mean to be a person of age, knowledge, and experience.

This verbal power is shown to have negative possibilities as well. In "Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich," Catherine Rainwater observes that Erdrich presents two distinct worldviews in *Tracks*. This is most vividly illustrated through the character of Pauline, who is a Puyat: "[T]he Puyats were known as a quiet family, with little to say. We were mixed-bloods, skinners in the clan for which the name was lost."[22] This is the classic dilemma of of the mixed-blood, people living between cultures and relegated to the lowly position of skinners, drudge work in the hierarchy of hunting society, so unimportant that the clan name has been forgotten.

Nanapush makes his feelings toward Pauline known early on:

> But I could not cast the Puyat from my mind. You might not remember what people I'm talking about, the skinners, of whom Pauline was the only trace of those who died and scattered. She was different from the Puyats I remembered,

> who were always an uncertain people, shy, never leaders in our dances and cures. She was, to my mind, an unknown mixture of ingredients, like pale bannock that sagged or hardened. We never knew what to call her, or where she fit or how to think when she was around. So we tried to ignore her, and that worked as long as she was quiet. But she was different once her mouth opened and she started to wag her tongue. She was worse than a Nanapush, in fact. For while I was careful with my known facts, she was given to improving truth.[23]

Pauline is indeed a handful, representing all the pain, rage, and frustration of a person forced to live in two different cultures while being rejected to a large degree by both. Early in the book, she pesters her father into sending her to Argus, where she intends to live as a white. Her past reappears almost immediately, however, in the form of Fleur Pillager, who shows up in Argus, is raped, then causes Argus to be leveled by a tornado. During the tornado, Pauline and her cousin Russell seek safety in an icehouse but are denied entrance by a group of white men already inside. Enraged, Pauline locks the men in from the outside, where all but one perish. Overwhelmed by guilt added to her existing identity crisis, Pauline becomes more and more aberrant.

In her confusion, Pauline wanders between white and Indian worlds. Initially, she assumes a role of keeper of the dead, then increasingly turns to religion. At the same time, she attempts to maintain contact on the reservation. Faced with the distance she has created between herself and the Indian people, however, she grows frustrated and destructive, becoming a caricature of the marginal person. Catherine Rainwater again observes,

> Despite her scorn for her Native American upbringing, Pauline (later to become Sister Leopolda) cannot quite escape her old way of construing experience .... She recounts the sufferings of St. John of the Cross, St. Catherine, St. Cecelia, and St. Blaise, and says with pride: "Predictable shapes, these martyrdoms. Mine took a different form.[24]

This passage helps illuminate what can happen when cultural codes conflict. 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 manifestations of her craziness, fueled by Catholicism, are clearly destructive, as Pauline gradually becomes more fanatic and embattled. In return for a crumb of recognition by Margaret, Pauline tells the story of what happened in Argus, information that Margaret solicits to use against her son's interest in Fleur Pillager. Warming to Eli and Fleur's sexual relationship, she tries to use Sophie Morrissey to get Eli for herself. When Nanapush tries to cure Fleur's waning powers in a sweat lodge ceremony, Pauline tries her best to interrupt by preaching Christianity.

Although Pauline's portrayal is not as attractive as others that speak to the positive effects of mixed blood on the evolution of tribes, it is very effective in its detailed presentation of the tragic aspects of such a mixed-blood figure. And, indeed, it is true that for every admirable "cultural broker" created by forced acculturation, there are thousands of confused and broken Paulines thrown on the cultural scrap heap; it is important that their loss is not forgotten.

Nanapush has resisted assimilation to white culture to an amazing degree through words. He cajoles, teases, scolds, croons, and prays in ways to make a weasel think twice. In addition, he has followed another tribal tradition: He has taken three young people under his wing and taught them traditional ways. Eli has become a hunter able to survive in the woods, although he succumbs to capitalism and tries to find his way by getting a job. Fleur, also a competent hunter, embraces Nanapush's spirituality more fully, although she, too, is eventually beaten down by the loss of her child and the Pillager land at Matchimanito:

> She had failed too many times, both to rescue us and save her youngest child, who now slept in the branches of bitter oaks. Her dreams lied, her vision was obscured, her helper slept deep in the lake, and all her Argus money was long spent. Though she traveled through the bush with gunnysacks and her skinning knife, though she worked past her strength, tireless, and the rough shreds piled to our ankles and spilled across the floor, Fleur was a different person than the young woman I had known. She was hesitant in speaking, false in her gestures, anxious to cover her fear.[25]

Although Fleur is finally beaten down, she becomes so only after having a powerful influence on all those around her. She demonstrates that there are different ways to live than liquor and the

dollar bill and that there is dignity and even power in the way she has chosen. Even the fact of her demise is deeply moving: She hitches herself to a cart and leaves rather than stoop to live in a way she does not believe.

Eli and certainly Fleur are nothing to be ashamed of, but it is Lulu who proves to be Nanapush's ultimate triumph. With many of his traditional methods of resistance frustrated, Nanapush moves to Kashpaw land and takes up a position of leadership in the tribal council. From this position, he plays his remaining cards and is able to retrieve Lulu from boarding school.

Beset as Nanapush is from within and without, he unerringly turns to kinship ways to work his method of preservation, focusing on Lulu:

> You were the last to emerge. You stepped gravely down, round-faced and alert, so tall we hardly knew to pick you out from the others. Your grin was ready and your look was sharp. You tossed your head like a pony, gathering scent. Your braids were cut, your hair in a thick ragged bowl, and your dress was a shabby and smoldering orange, a shameful color like a half-doused flame, visible for miles, that any child who tried to run away from the boarding school was forced to wear. The dress was tight, too small, straining across your shoulders. Your knees were scabbed from the punishment of scrubbing long sidewalks, and knobbed from kneeling hours on broomsticks. But your grin was bold as your mother's, white with anger that vanished when you saw us waiting. . . .[26]

With the return of Lulu, it is clear the saga of the Turtle Mountain Anishinabe is far from over. Nanapush's teaching has taken root, and, through this boisterous girl, tribal ways will not be forgotten. In *Tracks,* we are allowed to ponder lake monsters and ways of existence other than those of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant; we are allowed to glimpse a part of the beginnings of a new people, the Métis; and we are told more about the dispossession of Indian people. In *Tracks,* however, the central image of earth, or loss of earth, proves to be only a vehicle for Erdrich's larger discussion of self, family, community, and place, a discussion that widens considerably in *Love Medicine.*

NOTES

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2. Robert P. Wilkins and Winona H. Wilkins, *North Dakota: A History* (New York: Norton, 1977), 31.
3. Julie Maristuen-Rodakowski, "The Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota: Its History as Depicted in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* and *Beet Queen*," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 12:3 (1988): 40.
4. Ibid., 41.
5. James Welch, *Winter in the Blood* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 5.
6. Sister M. Clare Hartmann, *The Significance of the Pipe to the Gros Ventres of Montana* (Master's thesis, Montana State University, 1955), 8.
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9. William Unrau, *Mixed-Bloods and Tribal Dissolution: Charles Curtis and the Quest for Indian Identity* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1989), 135.
10. Louise Erdrich, *Tracks* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 4.
11. Ibid., 8.
12. Ibid., 3.
13. Ibid., 174.
14. Ibid., 175.
15. Ibid., 63.
16. Welch, *Winter in the Blood,* 40.
17. Erdrich, *Tracks,* 179.
18. Ibid., 33.
19. Ibid., 46.
20. Ibid., 7.
21. Ibid., 129.
22. Ibid., 14.
23. Ibid., 38–39.
24. Rainwater, "Reading between Worlds," 409.
25. Erdrich, *Tracks,* 177.
26. Ibid., 226.