



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
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## **Witnessing and Listening to Trauma in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks***

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How does one listen to what is impossible? Certainly one challenge of this listening is that it may no longer be simply a choice: to be able to listen to the impossible, that is, is also to have been chosen by it, before the possibility of mastering it with knowledge. (Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 10).

### **Introduction**

In 1969 Scott Navarre Momaday (Kiowa) published *House Made of Dawn*, which is considered as a literary landmark for Native American Renaissance. This novel paved the way for a great number of young and talented Native American writers, such as James Welch (Blackfeet/Gros ventre), Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), and Sherman Alexie (Coeur d'Alene) among others. One such writer, Louise Erdrich is a prolific and controversial Chippewa or Anishinabe<sup>1</sup> novelist. Prompt to revising her previously published novels, Erdrich's literary creation is a work in progress. In 1993, she revised and expanded *Love Medicine*. In an article entitled "Postmodernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko-Erdrich Controversy," Susan Perez Castillo underlines Leslie Marmon Silko's violent attacks against Erdrich for her systematic appropriation of postmodernist techniques, she believes, fail to render anything Native<sup>2</sup>. The general consensus, though, is that Erdrich's literary technique stands undoubtedly as a blend between Euro-American and Chippewa storytelling, as Roberta Rosenberg has argued in her article. For Rosenberg, what Erdrich does with the "healing power [of] storytelling" is universal and more important than its categorization<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The Chippewa also known as Anishinabe, Ojibwa are Native Americans who currently live in the USA and Canada. Anishinabe and Ojibwa are spelled Anishinabeg and Ojibway.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Perez Castillo, "Postmodernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko-Erdrich Controversy." *Massachusetts Review* 32 (1991): 285-94

<sup>3</sup> Rosenberg, Roberta. "Ceremonial Healing and the Multiple Narrative Tradition in Louise Erdrich's *Tales of Burning Love*." *Melus* 27 N<sup>o</sup>3 (Fall 2002):113-131.



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

The history of the encounter of Native American populations with Euro-American colonization is profoundly characterized by cultural imperialism, political violence and genocidal or extermination policies. The 1849 gold rush and the Manifest destiny of the same era had great consequences on Native American populations. In fact, entire indigenous nations were displaced and almost wiped out as white Americans vied with them for land and depleted herds of buffalo.

In *Tracks*, Erdrich reconstructs a lapse of the history of a band of Chippewa starting in 1912, coupled with a conjunction of disastrous events, which clearly capture this encounter as a pivotal historical moment. On the one hand, the indigenous people are dying off because of the new diseases that swept through the Anishinabeg homeland, and on the other hand they are losing their land, culture, and souls. In addition to this wave of misfortunes, money, Christianity and the big city attract the Chippewa youngsters, foretelling a total disappearance of anything Chippewa. In fact, lumber companies are threatening to wipe out the spiritual and sacred heart of Chippewa life and culture. As the custodian of the sacred sanctuary, Fleur Pillager lives near Lake Matchimanito with Misshepesu, the mythical man, a thick forest of high trees, animals and ghosts. In assuming the role entrusted to her family by tradition, Fleur perpetuates the myths, legends, and cultural practices of the group. In her description Pauline clearly presents Fleur as the go-between connecting the profane and the spiritual world: “She was the one who closed or swung it open. Between the people and the gold-eyed creature in the lake, the spirit which they said was neither good nor bad but simply had an appetite, Fleur was the hinge” (*T*, 139). In so being, she stands as the cultural and spiritual soul of the community, which is on the verge of being wiped out.

As a tragic narrative of the violent discourse of colonization and dispossession policies of American colonization, *Tracks* is an “oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*,” to paraphrase Caruth’s words (1996:7). In other terms, the



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

protagonists shift from near death to life again and again. In this paper I will argue that listening to Nanapush's traumatic stories vicariously transforms the listener and the readers into traumatized people. In listening to trauma, we become a part of it in the sense that we are equally possessed by it. Exploring the traumatic history of the Chippewa, we will scrutinize the dialogic frame of the novel, and then we will analyze how the traumatic history of the Anishinabeg and the traumatizing history of Christianity both shape Chippewa identity.

### **I/Weaving Trauma Through a Dialogic Framework**

Erdrich's *Tracks* alternatively weaves the oral testimonies of the main protagonists. On the one hand, we have Nanapush, a middle-aged, shrewd, talkative, medicine man who is very much knowledgeable in Chippewa culture and tradition. As an elder of the community, he remains the sole survivor and keeper of what is left of the cultural practices and customs of his tribe after the great loss they have suffered. Nanapush, "a name [that] losses power every time that it is written and stored in a government file" (*T*, 32), narrates to his granddaughter, Lulu, the stories of the devastation of the tribe, its endurance, and Fleur's life story as well. Is using the interpellations such as "From where we now sit, granddaughter..." (*T*, 9), "my girl, listen well" (*T*, 32), Nanapush invites Lulu to bear witness of the past. "By virtue of the fact that the testimony is addressed to others, the witness, from within the solitude of his own stance, is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension beyond himself" (1995:15). By bearing witness of his life story, of Fleur's, Nanapush tells the stories of Lulu's past.

On the other hand, Pauline Puyat, a girl in her teens, testifies of her peregrinations, self-alienation, and above all, she gives her take on Fleur's life. Unable to integrate the Chippewa or the white community, Pauline converts to Christianity and she adopts weird rites of self mutilation. In telling about their lives through Fleur's life story, Nanapush and Pauline unveil their relationship with her as well as their antagonism for



Revue Baobab: numéro 4

Premier semestre 2009

one another. Pauline calls “Nanapush, the smooth-tongued artificer...He had manufactured humiliations, traps. He was the servant of the lake, the arranger of secrets” (*T*, 196). For Nanapush, Pauline is just a liar, someone who takes liberty with her words. He says, “she was worst than a Nanapush, in fact. For while I was careful with my known facts, she was given to improving truth” (*T*, 39). These alternating, indirect exchanges between Nanapush and Pauline weave the dialogic framework of the novel.

The novel is cyclical in that it alternates Nanapush and Pauline’s narrations. Opening and closing with Nanapush’s voice and shifting from a male to a female voice, Erdrich skillfully crafts an indirect dialogue between her two protagonists/narrators. Structurally speaking, the narrative is schematically organized into chapters, which correspond to seasons, and years. Each chapter is introduced by time markers such as a season and a year and alternates the voice of the two narrators. These paratextual elements show the duality of time, which is both linear and cyclical.

As the two survivors of the tragedies that almost destroyed their whole community, Nanapush and Pauline have lost all their family members to the diseases that destroy the tribe. They are opposed because of their divergent views and the not so nice opinion they have of one another. Nanapush resists the new, imperialist forces that Pauline cherishes and collaborates with. Possessed by the colonial and imperialist forces of European modernity, Pauline wants to join the church in order to participate to the new power it brought with it. She is not speaking to any one in particular. While Nanapush narrates his life story of pain and suffering in order to root the great loss of the tribe into memory and renew himself in the new generation, Pauline relives the pain of Christ’s lot in order to acquire a new identity. As a result, she rejects her past by cutting all links with her past and by combating the cultural of the Anishinabe, which in her eyes stand as the signs of paganism and evil.

Fleur Pillager, the subject of most of the testimonies from Nanapush and Pauline almost never says anything about herself. Commenting on her voicelessness Sheila



Revue Baobab: numéro 4

Premier semestre 2009

Hassell Hughes observes that, "...Fleur's story, which is hers but not hers, circles around and around on Nanapush's tongue, spiraling into new configurations of 'relations' that might survive into the uncertain but never wholly new future."<sup>4</sup> The narratives coming from Nanapush and Pauline build a web of stories that partake in a cross-fertilizing process between male and female principles, wisdom and foolishness, truth and lies all blended together. As a result, the story as a whole is ambivalent. It is hard to sort out the truth in the maze of truth, half truth and lies that are said about Fleur's life.

All the mysteries surrounding Fleur, her multiple deaths by drowning, her relationship with "Mishespesu, the water man, the monster" (*T*, 11) come to amplify and render more difficult our access to the truth about her life. Whether it is Nanapush or Pauline's narration, the history of the traumatic history of the tribe and the transformation of the ethnic self clearly appears. While Nanapush testifies of the endurance and survival of the communal self through incredible hardship, Pauline mimics Christ's suffering as the way of salvation of her self. The ambivalence of suffering is that it leads simultaneously to destruction and salvation.

## **II/Trauma and the Imperative to Testify**

In the field of medicine, trauma was previously used to designate a bodily injury. In Freudian psychoanalysis, however, trauma has been defined as a double wound. With Freud, the traumatic bodily wound or injury becomes a psychic wound, a threat that breaks through psychological barriers following a violent act or an emotional shock. Commenting on Freud's parable of trauma as a veiled wound, Cathy Caruth emphasizes, on the link between wound and voice that tells us what is the wounded psyche in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996: 4). In Cathy Caruth's own terms, "To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event [...]"

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<sup>4</sup> Hughes, Sheila Hassel. "Tongued-tied: Rhetoric and Relation in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*." *Melus* V.25, N<sup>o</sup>3/4 (Fall/Winter 2000): 87-116.



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

and she continues to say that “The traumatized [...] carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (1995: 4-5). For Shoshana Felman, the exploration of the wound of trauma is simultaneously an exploration of language that

The wound gives access to the darkness that the language had to go through and traverse in the very process of its “frightful falling-mute.” To seek reality through language with one very being, to seek in language what the language had precisely to pass through, is thus to make of one’s own “shelterlessness”—of the openness and the accessibility of one’s own wounds—an unexpected and unprecedented means of accessing reality, the radical condition for wrenching exploration of the testimonial function, and the testimonial power, of the language: it is to give reality one’s own vulnerability, as a conditional of exceptional availability and of exceptionally sensitized, tuned-in attention to the relation between language and events (1996: 34).

In *Tracks*, trauma is both bodily and psychic wound, and above all, language is a shelter for those whose testimonies are survival. Whether it is a bodily or psychic injury, trauma generates a great imperative to tell one’s story. As a result, bearing witness becomes in itself a way of surviving through the simple act of testifying or bearing witness of what happened in the past that has a great bearing on the present. In the novel, we have two versions which sometimes compete, sometimes complement one another, and sometimes counter one another. Through this multivocal narrative, Erdrich complicates history and possibility of language to render truth.

The novel opens with Nanapush’s narration of the conjunction of a series of deadly diseases coupled with oppressive policies conducted by US government which led to the dispossession of the Anishinabe people of their land. In sharing the stories of his life, of the illnesses and the death of his family members with Lulu and indirectly with the readers, Nanapush’s stories of survival are no longer his own. In fact, the act of storytelling or testifying involves both narrator and listeners. Having survived such a great loss, Nanapush feels the imperative to testify, to bear witness as an act of survival.

Nanapush’s sense of loss and Lulu’s visible stubbornness because she refuses to listen to her mother, prompt the aging man to revisit some gloom moment of the past.



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

The diseases such as, “the pox and fever,” consumption “came on very slow...The outcome however was just as certain. Whole families of your relatives lay ill and helpless in its breath” (*T*, 2). Nanapush’s narration takes on a confessional and an apocalyptic tone. This sense of the doom, of the ending of time is presented by the dying out of the last of culturally important animal and plant species:

My girl, I saw the passing of times you will never know. I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a pelt of more than two years’ growth. I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake. I axed the last birch that was older than I, and I saved the last Pillager (*T*, 2).

The disappearance of these cultural landmarks indicates the total collapse and the end of a way of life for the Chippewa people due to the scarcity of food, deadly diseases, and the collapse of social structure. Talking directly to his granddaughter, Lulu, Nanapush bears witness of the tragedies he, Fleur, and the tribe as a whole have survived. By unearthing the tragic past with all its devastation, Nanapush brings to the surface the most painful experiences and memories of the past. As he shares these stories with Lulu, she and the readers vicariously witness the devastation and sense of loss. His own story is interwoven with that of Fleur Pillager, Lulu’s mother, whom he rescued when the epidemic was raging on:

Fleur, the one you will not call mother.

We found her on a cold afternoon in late winter, out in your family’s cabin near Matchimanito Lake, where my companion, Edgar Pukwan of the tribal police, was afraid to go. The water was surrounded by the highest oaks, by woods inhabited by ghosts and roamed by Pillagers, who knew the secrets ways to cure or kill, until their art deserted them”(*T*, 2).

Fleur is a survivor of the great destruction and loss. Thanks to Nanapush’s knowledge of medicinal plants, she gradually heals to play her spiritual role in her community. As the last survivor of the Pillagers, Fleur settles in Matchimanito, a spiritual center of the Chippewa. As Fleur gets better, she and Nanapush avoid conversations



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

because they bring to their recollection the memory of those who passed away. Since that past is painful, they do not want to talk about it. As Nanapush observes, the sense of being overwhelmed takes away from him and Fleur any will to live or speak:

We felt the spirits of the dead so near that at length we just stopped talking.  
This made it worse.

Their names grew within us, swelled to the brink of our lips, forced our eyes open in the middle of the night. We were filled with the water of the drowned, cold and black, airless water that lapped against the seal of our tongues or leaked slowly from the corners of our eyes. Within us, like ice shards, their names bobbed and shifted. Then the slivers of ice began to collect and cover us. We became so heavy, weighted down with the lead gray frost, that we could not move. Our hands lay on the table like cloudy blocks. The blood within us grew thick. We needed no food. And little warmth. Days passed, weeks, and we didn't leave the cabin for fear we'd crack our cold and fragile bodies. We had gone half windigo (*T*, 6).

With the description of his own recollection of the trauma of this period, Nanapush explores the deep internal wounds that nearly carried them away. If disease and illness do kill, the memory of having survived what killed many others is also deadly. The loss of speech in Nanapush and Fleur is symptomatic of their deep sense of loss that language cannot render. This impossibility of language to access history and the necessity to survive to testify drive the survivor with the imperative to bear witness. Similarly, his testimony aims at strengthening Lulu and passing on the past to her. Moreover, Nanapush's stories aim at awakening Lulu's consciousness to the tragedies that have shaped the history of the Chippewa as a people. In telling his stories, Nanapush wants his life story to serve as a foundation and material for Lulu to construct her new identity. In the process, Nanapush positions himself as a mythical figure that creates victories for his tribe out of defeats. Commenting on the Nanapush as a mythic figure, Ferrari points out:

The multiple possibilities existing in Nanapush's language are consonant with his character's connection to the trickster figure Nanabozho or Nanabush. The trickster mediates; for *Tracks*'s Nanapush mediating means crossing the border between the material and the spiritual, the visible and the visionary, subject and object, the white world and the Anishinabe world. Nanapush negotiates transformation and





Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009  
transcendence<sup>5</sup>.

While Nanapush uses his narrative as a healing ceremony for both Lulu and the reader, his nemesis, Pauline promotes the Christian theology of salvation which is inextricably linked with death. In Christianity the death of the body is necessary for the soul to be saved. This justifies Pauline's fascination with death and her sense of fulfilling her main mission that of gathering souls. While the Chippewa are starving because of the bad colonial policies, the destruction of wildlife and hunting restrictions, Pauline refuses to nourish herself. Instead, she inflicts tremendous suffering, pain, and violence upon herself. By inflicting violence upon herself, Pauline clearly endorses the colonial discourse and its imperialist violence on her Indian body, the Other. In sum, Pauline's living by the Christian principles of suffering transforms violence into the new sacrament coupled with a theology of self-transformation as the engine of communal history. Colonization and the church work hand in hand to transform the Chippewa into a submissive body.

### **III/ Trauma and salvation**

A member of a family "mixed-bloods, skimmers in the clan for which the name was lost" (*T*, 14), Pauline is alienated from the rest of her community. In part, because of her mixed blood origins and her position as an orphan, Pauline has no firm roots in the clan-based Chippewa community. From an early age, she identifies with her light complexion mother. In fact, Pauline is fascinated with anything white from an early age. As a young girl, she wants to join to nun to learn knitting instead of the traditional trade of the women of her community. Her father warns against the negative influence of the white world and alienating impact of the white town:

"You'll fade out there," he said, reminding me that I was lighter than my sisters.

"You won't be an Indian once you return."

"Then maybe I won't come back," I told him. I wanted to be like my mother, who

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<sup>5</sup> [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2342/is\\_1\\_33/ai\\_58055909/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2342/is_1_33/ai_58055909/)



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

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. In English, I told my father we should build an outhouse with a door that swung open and shut.”

“We won’t have such a thing upon our house.” He laughed. But he scorned me when I would not bead, when I effused to prick my fingers with quills, or hid rather than rub brains on the stiff skins of animals (*T*, 14).

Pauline is not preoccupied with losing her identity and her Chippewa culture. In fact, she tries to erase her Indianness and take on whiteness, symbol of power. Early in the novel, Pauline realizes her inability to fully integrate the Anishinabe clan-based social system. In her struggles to be part of mainstream America, however, Pauline is ironically trapped in the borderland, between two worlds, two cultures. Pointing out Pauline’s in-betweenness and her tragic fate, Rita Ferrari writes that:

Pauline [...] wanders back and forth over the internalized borders of her cultural identity, turning increasingly to Catholicism as a way to rid herself of Indianness. Yet even as she embraces more and more her own perverse spin on Catholicism, she is drawn to Matchimanito Lake where Nanapush lives with Fleur Pillager, her husband Eli Kashpaw, their daughter Lulu, and Eli’s mother, Margaret<sup>6</sup>.

A social outcast, Pauline is tolerated by Fleur as a companion. Whether it is in Argus, the big city in North Dakota or around Matchimanito, Fleur’s beauty draws men prompting Pauline’s jealousy. Despite the rumor that she kills her suitors, no man seems to notice Pauline. Her entrance into the convent signifies her entrance into a cycle of madness and mutilation of the body. For Pauline, Christianity and colonialism did not signify the beginning of suffering for the Chippewa as Nanapush does, but rather precisely the end of all suffering because the savior, Christ has redeemed all suffering when he died on the cross. Working hard in her position as a nun, Pauline who becomes Sister Leopolda tries to achieve what she believes to be her mission entrusted her by Christ among the Anishinabe:

Christ was there, of course, dressed in glowing white.  
“What shall I do now? I asked. “I’ve brought You so many souls!”

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<sup>6</sup> [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2342/is\\_1\\_33/ai\\_58055909/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2342/is_1_33/ai_58055909/)



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

And He said to me, gently:  
“Fetch more.”

Which is what I intended by going out among them with the net of my knowledge. He gave me the mission to name and baptize, to gather souls. Only I must give myself away in return, I must dissolve. I did so eagerly. I had nothing to leave behind, and nothing to acquire, either, except what would come into His hands (*T*, 140-141).

Western colonization has used the angle of religion as the point of entry in the heart and soul of the Chippewa people. Although many, such as Margaret among others, converted to the new religion, Pauline Puyat is deeply fascinated by the new religion which stresses on self-mutilation as a way of salvation. In her mind, “Suffering is a gift to God! I have given away everything I owned. All that I have left is my body’s comfort and pleasure, and I give that last pearl to Him now” (*T*, 144). In giving up her bodily comfort, Pauline eats very little and delays her natural bodily functions. She is literally trying to transform her body into a solid block, free of sensations and human desires.

Pauline’s religious fanaticism grows out of her alienation and inability to assimilate into the Chippewa community. She fails to enter mainstream America through the rich Morrissey family whose wealth is based on their buying back of the land of the poor Indians who could not hold not to it because they were starving. Her relationship with Napoleon Morrissey ends with a pregnancy, but she abandons her newly baby born, drawn in this world with spoons. Believing that modern technology is the clear indication of the power of the whites, Pauline decides to join the nuns to share their powerful. As she observes how the white religion has superseded Chippewa practices is symptomatic of white power:

It was like that with Him, too. Our Lord, who had obviously made the whites more shrewd, as they grew in number, all around, some even owning automobiles, while Indians receded and coughed to death and drank. It was clear that Indians were not protected by the thing in the lake or by the other Manitous who lived in trees, the bush, or spirits of animals that were hunted so scarce they became discouraged and did not mate (*T*, 139).



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

This description of the differences between Native's regression and White people's progress clearly shows the complex of inferiority that frames Pauline's worldview and attitude. Pauline perverts the message of Christianity in the sense that she focuses solely on suffering, pain, and martyrdom. In fact, all her life becomes a traumatizing experience since she is surviving on the past of Christianity that no more exists. Totally blinded by the colonizing veil of Christianity, she is totally ignorant of the present suffering of the Chippewa whose salvation can happen only through death. Midway through the novel, she assists Bernadette in helping people die and she becomes the embodiment of death itself. For Pauline, her life has to follow in the path of the saints of Christianity:

Some saints endured burning pitch or redhot tongs. Some were torn asunder by lions or, like Perpetua, exposed to a mad heifer that flourished its hooves. There was Cecilia, who outlived her own beheading, and Saint Blaise, combed to death with an iron rake. Saint John of the Cross was shut in a closet for a year, and half devoured by his own lice. Saint Catherine whirled. Predictable shapes, these martyrdoms. Mine took another form (*T*, 152).

Pauline's martyrdom through the mortification of her body and her self-inflicted wounds are symptomatic of her perverted understanding of Christianity. Her love for Christ is translated into carrying his wounds as a way to redeem herself from the sin of Indianness first by denying it and secondly by combating Anishinabeg's culture. Commenting on the redeeming function of Christ's wounds, Rene Girard gives in *The Scapegoat* the following description of Christ:

The redeemer whose sacrificed life cleanses the pollution from humanity changed the way that the victim's wounds and scars are culturally perceived. Rather than being repulsive marks of Underworld sacrifices, the wounds evolved into sacred symbols of heavenly sacrifice and redemption. The wounds are the portals to salvation, a place to hide and literally merge into the blood of Jesus (1992: 200).

As Nanapush, she lost her family, but she is also not assimilated into the community. Unlike Nanapush, she turns her traumatized past into a form of unhealthy, self-destructive drive against herself. Similarly to the buffalo understanding of their sense



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

of loss and their attempt to commit suicide in Nanapush's story, Pauline is suicidal. Her perverted sense of Christianity leads her to fight her culture she tags as paganism. As such, Pauline becomes the incarnation of dark power. She is a tragic character who is the slave of an obsessive neurosis based on the punitive precepts of Christianity.

Unlike Nanapush's testimonies, Pauline's narration is not specifically addressed to anybody in particular. In this regard, her narrative is similar to the language of the Bible, which is an impersonal, dogmatic, and universal testimony. This form of testimony relies primarily on scrip, writing, and the eyes of the readers to come to life and acquire meaning. Although Pauline's narrative voice clearly transpires, it is as if she is talking to herself since she has no clear interlocutor. By setting Pauline's narrative as a monologue, Erdrich casts her narrative voice as standing outside of the realm of oral tradition in the sense that it does not follow the traditional story telling frame which implies a narrator and a listener or an audience. This is symptomatic of Pauline's life and her forceful attempt to superimpose Euro-American values and Christianity on Chippewa culture.

The unfortunate result of Pauline's amalgamation of two cultures is profoundly destructive. She becomes a deranged, alienated being who lives in a hallucinatory world. In the end, Pauline's self-hatred, her antagonism to Anishinabe culture leads her to self-destruction and murder. After several confrontations in which Nanapush tricks and humiliates her, Pauline tries to take her revenge by killing the cultural imaginary of the Chippewa, the Lake man, Mishepushu. It is ultimately a way for her to show the power of the Christian God over the pagan one. Ironically, she violently murders Napoleon her one time lover and the father of her child. Pauline's attack on the Anishinabe shrine echoes Allan La Gunn's observation on the early Church's vision that, "Indians were principally as heathens, besotted by false gods and primitive notions, and has thus sought to void them of their Indianness on these grounds, through conversion or extirpation, then what better means to combat that process than by filling Indianness with its own substantial mythos, enforced by 'real,' active gods" (1998: 55). Instead of killing Mishepushu, the



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

quintessence of Indianness she wants to escape, she murders her other self.

### **Conclusion**

Erdrich's *Tracks* describes two processes of facing loss and of going through the pain of the act of witnessing through the narratives of Nanapush and Pauline. The novel weaves a web made of the discursive play and indirect dialogue between the two narrators. In short, it is also a dialogical process of exploration and an attempt to reconcile two worlds. In this intricate and complex construction built around Fleur Pillager's also transpires the antagonistic relationship between Nanapush and Pauline, Anishinabe culture and Catholicism. Erdrich's narrative does not offer an approved version of history. While both preach survival and salvation, orality, storytelling, culture operate through Nanapush as viable outlets for the Chippewa people. Instead of the solidarity that should normally united them because they survived the same ordeal, Nanapush and Pauline diametrically opposed.

Faced with sudden and massive death around him, Nanapush and Pauline become both survivors of this traumatic experience. However, their reactions are totally different. While Nanapush immerses himself in his culture to operate a holistic form of healing, Pauline turns to the new religion: Christianity. Her perverted understanding of the Christian theology leads her astray. Instead of reaching healing, she ends up hating herself and veers in what looks like insanity. Listening to the inside of the stories of life crisis and death requires empathy from the listener and transcendence from the narrator. To end, I would like to borrow Cathy Caruth's words on the complexity of dealing with trauma narratives. Let's quote her own words: "this book's understanding, constitutes the new mode of reading and of listening that both the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demands" (1996: 9). Louise Erdrich's novel does the same in her exploration of Chippewa culture at the turn of the twentieth century.



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

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