

## **Religious Intermixing in Native American Literature : A Study of *Tracks* and *The Last Report at Little Horse***

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**Resume :** Les questions religieuses cristallisent les positions et sont très souvent sources de tensions et de conflits entre les peuples à travers le monde. De part et d'autre, on assiste à la promotion de chaque idéologie religieuse mettant en mal la cohésion entre les peuples. Dans la littérature amérindienne, le christianisme est souvent perçu comme étant la source de dislocation des peuples autochtones et leurs croyances religieuses. Les personnages religieux, notamment les prêtres apparaissent comme les agents au service de la colonisation. La présente réflexion vise à montrer comment au-delà des divergences, ces deux obédiences religieuses s'interpénètrent et entretiennent des rapports cordiaux. En effet, si le but ultime de toutes religions est de prôner la paix et la cohésion sociale, les tensions entre elles apparaissent absurdes. Dès lors, l'exploration de l'interconnexion entre les religions s'avère intéressante dans la mesure où cela pourrait mieux expliquer le message de tolérance qui découle de cet échange culturel. L'emploi de la théorie postcolonialisme, à travers le concept de l'hybridité, permettra de briser les barrières entre les différentes religions en présence.

**Mot clés :** Amérindiens – Christianisme – Colonisation – Interconnexion – Spiritualité

**Abstract:** The issues of religions are very tricky and are often source of crises and conflicts between communities all over the world. From each part, people promote their own religious ideology threatening cohesion among people. In Native American literature, Christianity is often perceived as the source of Native American dislocation and the disruption of their religious beliefs. The religious characters such as the priests appear as the agents working for colonization. This current reflexion aims at showing that beyond some disagreements and different ways of doing things, these two religions interact, intermix and relate positively. In fact, if the ultimate goal of every religion is to promote peace and social cohesion, the tensions that arouse between them is illogical. Then, the exploration of religious intermixing is of particular interest as it accounts for the message of tolerance and solidarity. The use of postcolonialism theory through the concept of hybridity will help to subvert the barriers between the two different religions in presence.

**Key Words :** Christianity – colonization – Interconnexion – Native Americans – Spirituality

## Introduction

Catholicism is a religion that was introduced in the Native America territories centuries ago by white missionaries. The implementation of this religious practice was done by force so as to oblige them to fully adopt it and reject their own traditional religion considered as primitive and demoniac. To this end, severe measures were taken such as arrests, imprisonment, destruction of local places of worshipping. Leslie Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1981) denounces this oppression against the Native religion where in the following terms : "in the early twentieth century of Pueblo men and boys who were caught participating in the religious activities of the Kiva or ceremonial dances were arrested and imprisoned"(p.15) The novel corroborates the idea according to which some missionaries imposed western religion on Native American people. Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* that also deals with religion in some passages suggests the possibilities of combining the two beliefs through the character's actions and thoughts.

Taking our cue from the conflicting relationship between the Catholic belief system and the Native tradition religion, a certain number of questions arouse. Is a peaceful coexistence between the two religions viable? To what extent is the interpenetration of these modes of worshipping likely to create harmonious relationships?

This contribution shows how Erdrich's writings subvert dichotomies by revealing that these seemingly antagonistic religions can coexist peacefully. It explains that they can relate positively and harmoniously for a general welfare of our society. The present reflexion is theoretically based on postcolonialism through Nederveen Pieterse's concept of hybridity. For Pieterse, hybridity is a mode which advocates fusion of experiences based on a dialogue, be it between individuals, religions, sexes, nationalities, or ideologies. That is why he asserts this : "[Hybridity] denotes a wide register of (...) intensive inter-cultural communication, everyday multiculturalism and erosion of boundaries" (Pieterse, 2001, 3) The first section of the reflection scrutinizes the omnipresence of Catholicism in Erdrich's writings. The second section argues that there are similarities between the two mode of worshipping while the third part discusses the merging of Catholicism with Native American belief.

## I- The Recurrence of Catholicism in Erdrich's Novels

The occurrence of Catholicism is quite noticeable in almost all Erdrich's novels mostly in *Tracks* and *The Last Report At Little No Horse*. Thanks to her Catholic upbringing inherited from her grandfather, Erdrich's novels are replete not only with the representation or symbols of Catholic religion, but also with the evocation of events from the Bible. This collision between biblical writing and literature recalls hybridity and fosters interactions between the cultures in presence.

In *Tracks*, the words of Pauline the homodiegetic narrator at the beginning of the novel announces the abundant use of Catholicism and biblical references. The narrator asserts :

(...) three churches quarreled with one another for [Native Americans'] soul. There was a frame building for Lutherans, a heavy brick one for Episcopalians, and a long narrow shingle Catholic church. This last had a slender steeple, twice as high as any building or tree. (p.13)

Three churches, as the quote pinpoints, on a small reservation can be construed as the fact that Christianity is rampant on this Native American territory. Among these churches is the Catholic church. The size of its building 'twice as high as any building or tree' signals the predominance of Catholicism on the Chippewa territory. Thus, it is not astonishing to notice Other episodes of the novel is filled with biblical references in general and Catholicism in particular. Terms like priests, nun, sister convent, and Virgin Marie that are all related to catholic church pervade the text.

The first biblical allusion in *Tracks* is Pauline's life that recalls the story of the Apostle Paul in the Bible. First of all, the name Pauline correspond with the name Paul. Secondly and more interestingly, at the beginning of the novel Pauline is associated with crimes, but ultimately she " betrothed [her]self to God"(T,131). Similar transformation occurs with the apostle Paul who becomes God's follower, while he was against Christians whom he persecuted. Pauline reproduces the figure of the Apostle when she is chosen to serve God. Pauline's life, it can be argued, parallels Apostle Paul's confession in the Bible:

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man. I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. (1 Timothy 1 :12-13)

This biblical verse reveals what was Paul's attitude before being a Christian. Similar to Paul's conversion's which occurs after being a blasphemer and a persecutor, Pauline is an agent of

death before being chosen by God. She “was chosen to serve” (T, 137) like Apostle Paul. To express her attachment to Christianity, she declares : “I will be the bride and Christ will take me as wife, without death” (T, 204). This declaration, that urges a kind of marriage to Christ, echoes Paul’s conception of marriage between a man and a woman. Indeed, for the Apostle Paul “A wife must not separate from her husband (...) and a husband must not divorce his wife” (1 Corinthians 7 :10), making their relationships limitless, as Pauline puts “without death.” In addition to these biblical allusions, *Tracks* is full of words that allude to Catholicism: “Father Damien”(T, 2), “Mass” (T, 40), “Blessed Virgin” (T, 51), “Communion” (T, 54), “blessed water” (T, 61), “the Virgin” (T, 94, 95 ), “Pray to Our Lady”( T,124) , “Our blessed Lady” ( T,138), the “Cross of Myrtlewood” (T,141)

Equally referring to the Holy Scriptures, a passage of *The last Report at Little No Horse* reads : “Get out of here ! Get thee behind me !”(300). These words allude to the expressions uttered by Jesus addressing his apostle : “Behind me Satan !” The two other titles referring to the Bible are the titles of chapters 19 and 20, respectively : “The Water Jar” (296) and “A Night Visitation”(306). While the title Water Jar alludes to the first miracle of Jesus-Christ at a wedding ceremony when he transforms water into wine, A Night Visitation refers to the visit of Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Marie. It is during that visit that Marie was informed about the future birth of Jesus-Christ. These two titles indicate that Erdrich revisits Christianity and marries it to Native American pattern.

By alluding to biblical references and mainly Catholicism, the novel stresses Native Americans’ conversion to Christian religion. These references also help them to be familiar with Christian spirituality. As such, according to Connie Jacobs’ argument, Louise Erdrich’s novels fulfill “the (...) most crucial distinction of Native American literature [that] is the function it serves to Indians and non-indians alike” (Jacobs, 2001, 16). Jacobs means that Native American authors write simultaneously for the Native American and non-Native American audience. As a result, the novels focus on the interpenetration of various distinct worldviews that recalls hybridity.

## II- The Common Denominator Between the Two Religions

Though they differ and vary in forms of worshipping, Native traditional religion and Catholic religion make the promotion of love among human beings. In *Tracks*, Pauline’s conversion to Christianity, a religion that preaches love, facilitates her devotion for her people.

Her ties to her cultural background is illustrated in her following utterance : “I should not turn my back on Indians. I should go out among them”(T, 137). Indeed, Pauline takes advantage of a foreign religion to be close to her tribe. She does recede on her commitments to her community. Instead, her conversion to Catholicism turns out to be a strategy to serve the tribe. For instance, the narrator depicts the way Pauline qualifies her own commitment : “She regarded herself as one chosen to sacrifice her health after the example of Christ crucifixion, for the advantage of the church and the general good of her people”(T,138). Noticeable, Pauline’s combination of Chippewa and Catholic’s is her love for Fleur Pillager. In fact, her new religion does not disconnect from Fleur Pillager. Her desire to be with Fleur, one of the representatives of Indian spirituality suggests that she feels love and shares a connection with Native spirituality. That is why, she is most of the time with Fleur : she “followed her close (...) stayed with her, became her moving shadow”(T, 22). The two characters have friendly relationship that develops when they work together for Kozka’s Meats in Argus. Pauline confesses that mutual love in these terms: ‘I made excuses to work next to her’ (p.15) meaning that love is the cement that strenghtens all relationships. This closeness between both characters is also expressed by Lorena Stookey (1999) when she declares this : “she naturally finds Fleur particularly fascinating, and her account reveals to readers the love she feels about this full-blood Objiwa woman” (p.75)

In *The Last Report at Little No Horse*, Pauline is described by the white priest as “a fiercely masterful woman whose resounding bitterness of spirit had nonetheless resulted in acts of troubling goodness, inspirations, and even miraculous involvements” (TLR, 52 ). In other words, Father Damien recognizes that in her nature, Pauline is tightly linked to people of Little No Horse and their religion. That is why, the priest concludes that Pauline is a “savior” (TLR, 102) of her tribe, because she succeeds in bringing the two belief systems close together as advocated by Pieterse’s notion of religion syncretism.

Love is also manifested through Father Damien’s role as a priest. Unlike oppressive priests who embody “the Church’s single-minded desire that the Indian become as Europeanized as possible” (Owens, 1992, 69), Father Damien expresses love for the Natives. His preaching love comes into being as he is aware that “ his mission is to help, assist, comfort and aid, spiritually sustain, and advise the Anishinaabeg. Not the other way round” (TLR, 157). The verbs help, assist, comfort, aid, and advise in this description are all related to the ideas of exchange and closeness. They indicate that Father Damien is depicted as a tolerant priest in

terms of religious practice. He declares that “[the] esoteric forms of worship engaged in by the Objjwe are sound, even compatible with the teachings of Christ” (TLR, 49). This recognition of the compatibility between the two religions is quite essential in creating symbiosis not only between non Christians and Christians on reservation. The cohesion between the two systems of belief exemplifies the concept of interculturalism, one that appears to be a reliable way to avoid potential religious war, which is liable to disturb and affect the community.

In *Tracks*, the same feeling of love foregrounds the actions of the priest. He financially contributes to the rescue of Indian allotment by “ add[ing] the final quarter from his own pocket” (T,191). Due to his kindly contribution, old Nanapush calls him “our friend Father Damien” (T, 61). Thus, Father Damien who navigates between the Indian community and the white world creates a hybrid spiritual society where a narrow-minded Catholicism has no chance to prosper. That is why, Erdrich’s novels suggest the necessity to reconcile the two religions.

### III- Cross-Religious Exchange : A Path to Mutual Understanding

The perspective regarding the intermixing of Catholicism with traditional belief is reflected in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* and *The Last Report At Little No Horse*. As the writer argues, “there is no tension in my life regarding the two systems of beliefs” (A Chavkin Allan and Feyl Chavkin, 1994, p. 230). By these terms, she means to praise the possibilities of combining both beliefs through the Priest Father Damien and Pauline Puyat. Through these characters’ actions and deeds, religious hybridity occurs. They adopt elements of the other spirituality different from their own. The novels emphasize the harmonious connection because the “ tribe... has been heavily missionarized for three centuries” (Jacobs, 2001, p.164). Because of this long story of mission, the Native Americans are quite familiar with two religious practices, and, as a consequence, no religion is underestimated and rejected by white and Native characters. As John Erling (2016) argues, “it was interesting to see how the Catholic Church existed there along with the tribal religion. The two have coexisted let’s say for 400 years and they seem to do it successfully” (p. 23). From this argumentation, it can be inferred that Western and Native religions have good relationships, despite some regretful acts perpetrated by some white missionaries on the Natives.

The convergence of the two religions is quite embodied by characters like Pauline Puyat in *Tracks*. Being the daughter of a mixed-blood father and half-white mother, Pauline is one the

two narrators in *Tracks*. As a character, she works out a combination of Christianity and her native spirituality. Like Pauline Puyat in *Tracks*, Erdrich stresses her grandfather's ability to incorporate tribal beliefs in Catholicism : "My grandfather has had a real mixture of old time and church religion [...] He would do pipe ceremonies for ordinations and things like that. He just had a grasp on both realities, in both religions" (Bruchac, 1987, p.1).

In *Tracks*, Pauline is introduced to Catholicism and decides to become a nun. She strongly believes that this imported religion fits perfectly her; that is why, she claims her choice : "I was chosen to serve"(T, 137). Thus, she enters the Sacred Heart Convent, the representation of the Catholic God on the reservation. Her decision to be a nun and adopt the teachings of the dominant religion can be construed as an act of religious hybridization. She is a Native woman, and she bears incarnates quite to the same degree her local spirituality. Besides, "no Indian girls" (T, 138) have entered the Convent before Pauline. This decision to admit a Native to join White's people religious institution illustrates the novel's flexible view of religion. Such a flexibility calls for the erosion of the dichotomy 'Christians versus Non-Christians', suggests the promotion of interreligious communication. Indeed, as a postcolonial novel, Erdrich's *Tracks* demonstrates the mixture of religions which are held to be different. People can choose or convert to the religion of their individual choice.

Pauline's merging religions is illustrated through her link to shamanism. In spite of her belief in Christianity, Pauline views the world from the lens of her Chippewa spirituality, too. That is the reason why, she wears "a dream catcher (...) alongside the crucifix"(T, 66). This picture symbolizes the harmonious relationships between the two religions. The 'dream catcher' symbolizes Native religion, while the crucifix represents Christianity. By wearing both symbols around her neck, Pauline intends to be the manifestation of ideal religious hybridity. As a consequence, Susan Friedman (1994) depicts her as "convertly syncretic" (p.125). The female character recognizes that description when the narrator in *Tracks* notes : "Like most converts, Pauline retains many aspects of the religion she attempts to leave behind as 'pagan'(T, 114). For instance, according to Friedman, Pauline Puyat believes in the concept of two spirits, one of the believes in the supernatural in Chippewa religion.

In this regard, Pauline is firmly convinced that Mishupeshu, the lake monster enters the body of Napoleon. As a homodiegetic narrator, she recounts : "He had appeared to me as the water thing, glass breastplate and burning iron reign" (T, 203). Her belief in her local spirituality is manifested through the battle she wages against the monster :



My fingers closed like hasps of iron, locked on the strong rosary chain, wrenched and twisted the beads close about his neck until his face darkened and he lunged away. I hung on while he bucked and gagged and finally fell, his long tongue dragging down my thighs. I kicked and kicked away the husk, drove it before me with the blows of my feet. A light began to open in the sky and the thing grew a human shape, one that I recognized in gradual stages. Eventually, it took on the physical form of Napoleon Morrissey. (T, 202)

In this epic narrative, Pauline takes the form of the Owl in order to kill Napoleon. She reveals: “I snapped him in my beak like a wicket-boned mouse” (T, 73). She even describes herself as having “the small and staring eyes that did not blink” (T, 74). This metamorphosis into an Owl testifies to Pauline’s belief in Manitous or spirits, as Friedman (1994, p.110) argues. These spirits act as good and evil forces in Chippewa’s daily life. Although she is a nun, Pauline addresses “different Manitous alongside with Blessed Virgin and Her heart” (T, 135). This ambivalent posture displayed by Pauline shows the possibility of promoting two religions adopted by the Native character.

The transgression of religious boundaries is also established through the white priest Father Damien. Erdrich depicts this white priest as a character who can experience a communion with non-Christian spirituality. For instance, Father Damien prays in the Native local language. Through this action of praying in a Native local language, intercultural and interreligious interactions are manifested. It is also a means to unveil another side of white Catholic priests. Contrary to some priests who illustrate themselves as “disrespectful of foreign culture and beliefs” (Lysik, 2017, 155) and ban or prohibit tribal religious practices as it is the case with the arrival of the colonizers, Father Damien “redeems the church considerably” (Owens, 1992, 204-205). The priest’s actions enable to give a positive image to Christian religion which is accused of being a source of Native Americans’ assimilation and cultural loss.

Besides, in order to facilitate his preaching, he makes an effort to learn their language and translate Catholic texts into Ojibwe. Therefore, his first action once on the reservation is to learn “Ojibwe words and phrases” (TLR, 51). As such, “he learned all the polite Ojibwe he could cram into his brain – how to ask children and spouses, how to comment on the weather, how to accept and appreciate food” (TLR, 62). In his decision to acquire the host language, Father Damien is assisted by Nanapush, the guardian of the local religion. Damien testifies this assistance when he openly declares this: “The old man was my teacher” (TLR, 310). This collaboration is an attempt to facilitate a dialogue between two spiritual traditions.



The narrator emphasizes the priest's humility and ability to accept religious difference through this description: "he hunched in the pole hut [the local church] and sit upon bare tamped ground" (*TLR*, 215). The priest's act of humility is illustrative of his intention to get close to the local religion, even if "according to Church doctrine, it was wrong for a priest to undertake God's worship in so alien place" (Lysik, 2017, 215). For Father Damien, this Church doctrine is obsolete and can be debunked. Thus, while dutifully observing liturgical practices, he incorporates the local religion as in the following prayer: "Saint Augustine, Nanabozho, whoever can hear me, give me a little help now" (*TLR*, 226). By adding Nanabozho to Saint Augustine, the priest embraces religious transgression. For him, only one belief cannot help the world; so he combines two religious practices. The use of the word "whoever" can be understood as the call for diversity. Whether it is Catholicism or shamanism, there is no restriction. Both can be helpful.

In *Tracks*, Father Damien and Nanapush as the representative of two religions, work hand in hand on the occasion of the baptism of a new born baby. Their collaboration at this religious ceremony is illustrated through the narrator's statement: "He [Father Damien] carried his host and chalice. I [Nanapush] gave him a dipper from the bucket." (*T*, 61) As the ceremony proceeds, Father Damien performs the action of baptism, while Nanapush gives the name of the baby: Lulu Nanapush. This peaceful cooperation corroborates the message of tolerance in religious intermixing.

### Conclusion

This article designed in the frame of the meeting of cultures, has been conducted through the theme of religious intermixing in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* and *The Last Report At Little No Horse*. The argument has consisted in exploring the recurrence of the Catholicism in the novels and revealing that love crosses the boundaries of religions and invites dialogue between them. And this helps the reader to perceive that we can be from dissimilar religious ideologies and work hand in hand. Religious intermixing appears as a solution to antagonism not only between Catholicism and traditional Indian belief, but also between all religions in the world. Even if white missionaries, mainly Catholic priests have been regarded as disrespectful actors of foreign culture and beliefs, it can be argued that many people in both communities have been positively and mutually influenced by the two belief systems. Ultimately, Louise Erdrich's

novels ascribe hybridity not as depriving, but rather as an opportunity to bring two worlds together.

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