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Sanja Runtić

Reimagining the *Frontier* in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*



In recent decades numerous attempts have theorized (post)colonial subjectivity in spatial terms. Concepts such as Homi Bhabha's *third space*, Gloria Anzaldúa's *borderlands* and Mary Louise Pratt's *contact zone*, to name but a few, have all emphasized a dual spatiality inherent in the colonial experience, highlighting its ambivalent, dynamic and contradictory character as a potential for cultural emancipation and decolonization. Louis Owens' study of Native American literature and film *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place* (1998) follows the same line. Employing the term *frontier*, Owens denoted a transcultural, multidirectional and conflicting space occupied by the colonized. In contrast to the concept of the *territory*, a static space mapped by the authoritative discourse "constructed to contain and neutralize Indians," *frontier* is a dangerously unstable and hybridized space that refuses to be confined through boundaries. It is the "space of extreme contestation" and "multifaceted contact within which every utterance is challenged and interrogated, all referents put into question" (26, 42):

From the very beginnings of European relations with indigenous Americans, the goal of the colonizer has been to inhabit and erase an ever-moving frontier while shifting “Indian” to static and containable “territory” . . . Native Americans, however continue to resist this ideology of containment and to insist upon the freedom to reimagine themselves within a fluid, always shifting frontier space. (27)

In this view the *frontier* encompasses not just the physical terrain but also the psychological and cognitive aspects of the colonial encounter; its space is thus both external and internalized. For Owens, it is precisely this intrinsic dimension of the *frontier* that predominates in contemporary Native American writing, serving as “a bi-directional, dynamic zone of resistance. Within that zone, we are the ones who get to ‘make and tell’ our stories” (47).

Louise Erdrich’s novel *Tracks* (1988) in many ways recreates such a *frontier* zone. Utilizing the conventions of magical realism and the grotesque, Erdrich designed a hybridized textual space that effectively questions and destabilizes the consistency of colonial symbols and identity constructs. This narrative geography is most obvious in the characterization of Pauline Puyat, one of the protagonists and narrators in the novel. Mixed-blood Pauline is one of the characters who, confronted with the new culture, loses her tribal identity and identifies with the dominant worldview. Leaving the reservation for the town, Pauline manifests both physical and mental disconnection from her tribal roots and develops an almost pathological hatred of her indigenous heritage. Adopting the Anglo-American system, she starts seeing her people “through the eyes of the world outside of us” (14), aware that for the whites all Natives are “invisible” (cf. Ferrari). Convinced of the superiority of the settler culture, Pauline converts to Christianity and joins the Sacred Heart Convent: “Our lord, who had obviously made the whites more shrewd, as they grew in number, all around, some even owning automobiles, while the 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” (139). When the convent subsequently passes a rule that only white girls can become nuns, Pauline completely denies her Anishinaabe heritage, persuading herself that she is not “one speck of Indian but wholly white” (137). Through this radical denial of her past and the internalization of the values of the dominant culture, Pauline fully demonstrates what Duane Champagne terms “acceptance and participation in the colonizer’s new order,” and Ashcroft et al. describe as “a mimicry of the centre proceeding from a desire not only to be accepted but to be adopted and absorbed. It caused those from the periphery to immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in an attempt to become ‘more English than the English’” (1989: 4).

As a nun, Pauline exhibits all the elements of what Edward Said called the “imperial creed, a sense of mission, historical necessity, and evangelical fervor” (286). Amidst the threat of physical and cultural extinction, the perils of disease and alcoholism, loss of land and traditional lifestyle faced by her tribe, Pauline sees herself as a “visionary

savior” who has a mission to “name and baptize” (Cornell 51, 140) her people and so release them from misery by taking them to Christ:

I saw the same. I saw the people I had wrapped, the influenza and consumption dead whose hands I had folded. They traveled, lame and bent, with chests darkened from the blood they coughed out of their lungs, filing forward and gathering, taking a different road. A new road. I saw them dragging one another in slings and litters. I saw their unborn children hanging limp or strapped to their backs, or pushed along in front hoping to get the best place when the great shining doors, beaten of air and gold, swung open on soundless oiled fretwork to admit them all. Christ was there, of course, dressed in glowing white. (140)

The discursive transformation of history, whose discovery is often seen as the main goal of postcolonial criticism, is clearly discernible through Pauline’s sharp demarcation between good and evil, civilization and barbarity. Like the first colonists, who saw the “influence of the devil” in the new land and its people (Cotton Mather, qtd. in Bataille 3), Pauline too sees pagan traits all around her:

I was called from the convent to house after house . . . I should not turn my back on Indians. I should go out among them, be still, and listen. There was a devil in the land, a shadow in the water, an apparition that filled their sight. There was no room for Him to dwell in so much as a crevice of their minds. (137)

Yet, in spite of her rigid Christian mindset, Pauline exhibits occult tendencies and supernatural abilities that she regularly uses for evil purposes. Having acquired magical powers from Moses, she tempts Eli to seduce Sophie (80), which gives her an opportunity to take a revenge on him and Fleur: “And then, as I crouched in the cove of leaves, I turned my thoughts on the girl and entered her and made her do what she could never have dreamed of herself” (83). Even though some interpretations see Pauline’s attempt to renounce her Indianness as successful (Tanrisal), Nicholas Sloboda argues that her identity remains hybrid nevertheless (72, 73). Similarly, Rainwater warns that Pauline cannot completely abandon the old worldview that is still non-Christian, and her interpretation of experience is ambivalent and irreconcilable despite assimilation (409). In spite of her religious transformation, Pauline is unable to erase the old consciousness and her tribal heritage, but on the contrary, “replaces the magical element of Catholic faith with her tribal beliefs” (Delicka 28). In other words, the magical elements destabilize the codes of Pauline’s conversion and assimilation.

Magical realism is one of the main strategies used in *Tracks* to question and redirect the meaning of the colonial symbols. According to Wendy Faris, magical realism combines the realistic and the fantastic in such a way that “magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed,” but at the same time refuse to be assimilated in that reality (163, 168). Magical realism thus expands the concept of experiential reality, depicting a plural fictional space that is fluid and transmutable (see also Zamora 500, 544). That capability of magical realism—to embrace disparate conceptual and political

geometries and stage a dialectical combat of discursive systems—reveals its counter-hegemonic potential. As Suzanne Baker further explains, “magic realist narrative recapitulates a dialectical struggle inherent within the postcolonial culture. The binary oppositions... undergo a process of dialectical interplay which undermines the fixity of borders between them, foregrounding the gaps, absences and silences produced by the colonial encounter” (85). Similarly, confronting the Ojibwa and Judeo-Christian cosmologies, Erdrich moderates the fixity of binaries and creates a dual space in which she dissects colonial doctrines and practices.

Erdrich creates such a space through the discourse of madness. As a character and narrator, Pauline is characterized by psychological instability and a tendency to distort perceived content. The beginnings of her “mission” and her entry into the dominant institutions are accompanied by her progressive descent into madness. Her rigid conception of faith, for instance, results in absurd forms of ascetism. As a memento of Christ’s sufferings, Pauline wears underwear made of potato sacks, deprives herself of basic bodily needs, puts pins in her veil and nettles in her hair, and walks with shoes on the wrong feet. As she herself admits, these bizarre rituals are acts of self-mortification, “pain” that imbues her with a feeling of completeness and life: “I was hollow unless pain filled me, empty but for the pain” (192).

However, Pauline’s obsession with Christian salvation, spiritual and racial purity leads her not only to insanity but also to sin. Emphasizing Pauline’s fanaticism, Erdrich implies that she is a *windigo*, a person obsessed with evil and dangerous spirits. In Ojibwa religion, the *windigo* denotes mental disturbance that can have various manifestations—from deep melancholy to violence, including “an irresistible desire to consume human flesh” (Adamson Clarke 38). Pauline reveals a similar obsession with death when she helps Bernadette to aid the sick. Observing Mary Pepewas, a sick girl, Pauline convinces herself that the girl wants to end her life and uses magical powers to kill her:

She did not stir. She did not arch from the bed or twist to evade death or push it away from her face as it descended, entered, I don’t know how. She let it fill her like dark water and then, a narrow-bottomed boat tied to shore, she began to pull away. But she was moored by her jaw, caught, for as the current drew her off her mouth opened, wider, wide as can be, as if she wanted to swallow herself. The waves came and then, soundless, she closed her eyes, strained and tossed. Perhaps, hand over hand, I could have drawn her back to shore, but I saw very clearly that she wanted to be gone. I understood this. That is why I put my finger in the air between us, and I cut where the rope was frayed down to string. (67–68)

Pauline’s act stands in sharp contrast to the Anishnaabe concept of *bimaadiziwin* (see Gross, 2003: 128) and the Midewewin codes, according to which the healing power is inseparable from ethics and morality, as the healers are “required to possess good character” (Johnston 84) and use their powers solely “for the common good” (Gross 2005: 51). Moreover, killing Mary instead of healing her, Pauline is blissful that her apostolic purpose is completed, “surprised how light I felt, as though I’d been cut free as well” (68).

In magical realism, “plural worlds” are brought face to face but they “do not merge” (Wilson 228). That effect, which Erdrich achieves by transferring Christian tenets to the terrain of the magical, lays bare the ambiguity of Pauline’s mission and the idea of conversion itself. Like settlers’ greed for land, Pauline’s evangelistic zeal, her “hunger” to kill more Indians so that she can bring new souls to Christ, turns vile and insatiable: “‘What shall I do now?’ I asked. ‘I’ve brought You so many souls!’ And He said to me, gently: ‘Fetch more’” (140).

Throughout the novel Pauline’s *windigo* traits unveil the inconsistency of her Christian creed. When she goes to the middle of the lake to be tempted for forty days and nights like Christ in the desert, Pauline starts a merciless fight with a man who approaches her, convinced that it is Satan:

He rose, shoved me against a scoured log, rubbed me up and down until I struck. I screamed once and then my tongue flapped loose, yelled profane curses. I stuffed the end of the blanket in his mouth, pushed him down into the sand and then fell upon him and devoured him, scattered myself in all directions, stupefied my own brain in the process so thoroughly that the only things left of intelligence were my doubled-over hands. What I told them to do, then, they accomplished. 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. (202)

Soon enough Pauline realizes that the man whom she strangled with the rosary was not Satan, but Napoleon Morrissey, her first lover. Like the colonists who invoked the battle of good and evil to wipe out the natives, Pauline uses the Manichean discourse to cancel her sin: “I had committed no sin. There was no guilt in this matter, no fault. How could I have known what body the devil would assume?” (203). As Homi Bhabha asserts, the colonial myth requires “that the space it occupies be unbounded, its reality coincident with the emergence of an imperialist narrative and history, its discourse non-dialogic, its enunciation unitary, un-marked by the trace of difference” (115). Through Pauline’s madness Erdrich completely undermines this myth. Possessed by visions and magic, Pauline uses “satanic” methods to serve Christ’s purpose, thus exhibiting the very traits that she claims to defy. Whenever she commits sin—by killing Mary Pepewas or denouncing Fleur—Pauline feels relief: “If I took off my shoes I would rise into the air. If I took my hands away from my face I would smile. I tore leaves off a branch and stuffed them into my mouth to smother laughter” (68). Moreover, she cannot even distinguish whether her vision is that of Christ or Lucifer:

He crept in one night dressed in a peddler’s ripped garments with a pack on his back full of forks, scissors, and paper packets of sharp needles. He tried them all out upon my flesh. “Are you the Christ?” I screamed at last. “I am the Light of the World,” he laughed.

I thought of Lucifer. Even the devil quotes scripture to his own foul purpose. . . .

“We’ll meet in the desert,” he shouted before he vanished. I had to wonder. Which master had given me these words to decipher? I must hate one, the other adore.”
(193)

Pauline’s mind thus becomes a conflicted ground in which boundaries are blurred and binaries lost. Her distortion of the Nicene Creed prayer—“Dark from dark, I prayed, True God from True” (195)—confirms that as well.

Through Pauline’s insanity, Erdrich also introduces the motif of illness. Having been in touch with the dead, Pauline deliberately spreads deadly germs and avoids washing her hands, touching “others with the same hands” she “passed death on” (69). Fear of contamination is one of the central ingredients of various forms of discrimination. As Roberto Fernandez observes, accusing them of uncleanness and promiscuity, imperialist thinking usually sees indigenous peoples as an epidemiological trigger, a threat to modern civilization (170). Pauline’s characterization ironically dissolves this presumption. Depicting illness as both the tool and the metaphor of Pauline’s mission, Erdrich thematizes the Western “civilizational” project itself as the main source of contagion and danger, as writings of early Puritan chroniclers vividly confirm: “God had sent a ‘wonderful plague’ among the savages to destroy them and to leave most of their lands free for civilized occupation. (Edward Winslow) . . . [The natives] are neere all dead of the small Poxe, so as the Lord hath cleared our title to what we possess” (John Winthrop qtd. in Pearce 20).

Signs of Pauline’s madness are additionally emphasized through elements of the grotesque. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the grotesque is characterized by a union of differences, a liberation “from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted” (34) and “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (19, 20). Jeanne Delbaere-Garant defines grotesque realism as a manifestation of magical realism which, through the mixing of codes, verifies a distortion of reality (256). Pauline’s insanity is one of the main sources of such a hybridized outlook. Denying her own body and its functions after entering the convent, Pauline also starts neglecting her hygiene, avoids washing herself and her clothes, believing that her malodorousness is a sign of holiness: “My rank aroma was the perfume my soul exuded, devotion’s air” (153). Similarly, having killed Napoleon, Pauline realizes that she is naked, which she tries to conceal by throwing herself “into the ditches”: “I rolled in dead leaves, in moss, in defecation of animals” (203). Yet, Erdrich exposes Pauline’s behavior as mental disturbance, not as a sign of faith and spiritual purity as Pauline herself wants to believe. According to Ojibway beliefs, one’s well-being is closely related “to the well being of the inner being of a person,” whereas sickness represents “the physical form of inner turmoil” (Johnston 71).

Apart from the non-ethical relation towards the living and the dead, mental and physical illness can also manifest itself as uncleanliness. Christopher Vecsey describes how the Anishinaabe “burned refuse, aired bedding, bathed frequently, washed their hair, used sweat lodges, washed their cooking and eating implements, and sweetened their homes with fragrant medicinal herbs and roots” (149, 154). Trying to change Pauline’s sick habits, Nanapush teaches her the importance of hygiene: “You have to dry a soaked potato sack in sunlight! . . . Listen to an old man. I’m only telling you this for your benefit!” (151). Mocking her ways, Nanapush not only lowers and materializes the sublimity of Pauline’s penance, but once again inverts the dichotomy civilization/barbarity. According to Dragutin Lučić, Western history has been “a perpetual homily on cleanliness in the register from the highest to the lowest notes,” from purgatory to ethnic and political cleansing (29, my translation). Similarly, Anne McClintock argues that soap, light and white clothes have been main fetishes of imperialism and Western civilization. Branding the original inhabitants as unclean, colonial structures utilize the poetics of cleanliness to legitimize the invasion of their own economic and cultural values (32, 226). Ironically, through her attempt to cleanse herself of her “paganism,” Pauline becomes spiritually, physically and morally the most unclean character in the novel. Nanapush directly relates to her assimilation: “You’re more and more like the whites who never wash themselves clean!” (153).

The madness which makes it possible to escape “the false ‘truth’ of this world in order to look at the world with eyes free from this ‘truth’” is also discernible from the description of Pauline’s pregnancy and her delivery (Bakhtin 49). Good “at easing souls into death but bad at breathing them to life, afraid of life in fact, afraid, of birth” (57), when she finds out that she is pregnant by Napoleon Morrissey, Pauline wants to rid herself of the baby at any cost. “The acts of the bodily drama,” including “pregnancy,” are “the main events in the life of the grotesque body,” says Bakhtin, pointing out that one of the main traits of the grotesque is playing with boundaries between two bodies (317, 322) and representation of “two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated and born” (26). Similarly, in her delusional mind Pauline equates delivery with death. She paradoxically refuses to give birth in order to protect her child from sin. Her determination to terminate her pregnancy is additionally based on her fear that an illegitimate child will make her a heretic too: “If I gave birth, I would be lonelier. I saw, and I saw too well. I would be an outcast, a thing set aside for God’s use, a human who could be touched by no other human” (135).

Grotesque madness is evident in the scene when Pauline tries to do away with the baby by striking her stomach with an axe handle, so that she can free herself of her sin and dedicate her life to God: “And since I had already betrothed myself to God, I tried to force it out of me, to punish, to drive it from my womb” (131). In other words, Pauline tries to take her child’s life in order to save her own soul. Even though Christian theology sees sin as a manifestation of man’s separation from God, Pauline on the contrary

commits mortal sin to get closer to God. Through this paradox Erdrich once again deconstructs the imperial paradigm of conversion, as Pauline does not shrink from killing to enact “salvation.” Pauline’s belief that her exceptional destiny absolves her from her sin— “I was forgiven of my daughter. I should forget her. He had an important plan for me, for which I must prepare, that I should find out the habits and hiding place of His enemy” (137)—once again resonates the strategy of the colonizer to “falsify history” and so “absolve himself” of the conditions under which victory was attained (Memmi 52).

Accepting the dominant religion, Pauline also experiences a separation from her own body as something sinful and shameful. In the grotesque picture of the world, the body is imbued with strictly topographical meaning. Whereas the face and the upper body epitomize heaven, the belly and the lower body represent the earth—the mechanism of birth, but also of absorption and death (Bakhtin 21). Similarly, Pauline’s sense of guilt is attached to her lower body. Apart from suppressing her digestive and bladder functions, Pauline also wants to obliterate the birth mechanism and refuses to push during the delivery:

I dug my heels into the sheets, into the straw ticking, shut and held. But the child moved, inched forward. Her will was stronger. I sat up suddenly and gripped the top rails of the bed. I deceived her, lay sideways, and let the convulsions of her movements pass. . . . I held still and howled and in the interludes I told Bernadette I had decided to die, and let the child too, no taint of original sin on her unless she breathed air. (135)

Terrorizing her body to protect herself from the evils of nature and the temptations of instincts, Pauline “brings to a pitch her acute experience of intolerable borders” (Ferrari 155). Yet, by denouncing her body and its functions, Pauline also attests to the fact that the body is a construct “imprinted by history” and “disciplinary discursive practices” (Hall 11), the “‘text’ on which colonisation has written its most graphic and scrutable messages” (Ashcroft et al. 1995: 322). Whereas the traditional heroine Fleur goes to the world of the dead to save her children, when with Bernadette’s help she gives birth to a healthy girl, Pauline’s motherly instinct evaporates under the burden of “sin”: “But the child was already fallen, a dark thing, and I could not bear the thought. I turned away. ‘You keep Marie.’” (136). Those words once again correlate Pauline’s madness to her colonized state. Retelling Nanapush’s description of the buffalos that survived the extermination, Pauline ironically delineates the scope of her own insanity:

It was as old Nanapush had said when we sat around the stove. As a young man, he had guided a buffalo expedition for whites. He said the animals understood what was happening, how they were dwindling. He said that when the smoke cleared and hulks lay scattered everywhere, a day’s worth of shooting for only the tongues and hides, the beasts that survived grew strange and unusual. They lost their minds. They bucked, screamed and stamped, tossed the carcasses and grazed on flesh. They tried their best to cripple one another, to fall or die. They tried suicide. They tried to do away with their young. (139, 140)

Turning Pauline's mind and body into a colonized space, Erdrich fully exposes the imperial dogma and the psychophysical perils of its internalization. Pointing out the wickedness, grotesqueness, and insanity of Pauline's missionary pursuit by unsettling the boundaries of the magical and the real, she disturbs the colonial meta-narrative and its evangelistic tools. Accordingly, filling her text with conflicting referents, Erdrich creates a polyphonic space in which the discourse of hegemony is estranged, and power relations reworked and reversed. She writes a narrative that effectively reimagines the *frontier*, showing a venue of resistance from which the colonized voice can speak to the center and be heard:

The Indian has appropriated and occupied the frontier, reimagining it against all odds. A century after Frederick Jackson Turner's famous pronouncement, the frontier appears to be moving once again, but this time it is a multidirectional zone of resistance . . . the Indian continues to "light out" from the territory ahead of the rest toward new self-imaginings, continual fluidity, and rebirth. (Owens 28, 41)

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