

LIMINALITY AND HYBRIDITY: CONSEQUENCES OF LIVING BETWEEN TWO WORLDS. LOUSIE ERDRICH'S TRACKS' PAULINE PUYAT AS A CASE STUDY



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Abstract

In this paper, I analyze the concept of liminality and the negative collateral consequences it might bring to the liminal and hybrid character of Pauline Puyat. The definition of liminality is going to be analyzed as the most characteristic attribute of Pauline Puyat's personality, a mixed- blood character in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (2017). As a half-breed female, Pauline belongs to both and to none of the two traits that make up her identity. This duality causes in her many contradictory feelings of isolation, loneliness and jealousy that will gradually disturb her mind and, eventually, she will act in an incoherent manner. Because she has two identities, Pauline is expected to enjoy her multicultural frame. Contrarily, Pauline Puyat's liminality and hybridity affect her own self and, at some points, others'.

Key words

acculturation, christianism, colonialism, hybridity, identity studies, liminality, transculturation

Introduction

Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (2017) reflects the colonial context of land usurpation that was affecting the Anishinaabe (or Chippewa) Native American tribe during the first decades of the 20th century, as well as its aftermath. These consequences are based on the appropriation of their lands, which created a general distrust of the white population. This socio-political background takes place during Grover Cleveland's presidency. Cleveland signed the Dawes Act to make a profit at the expense of Native Americans' lands: Native American tribes were asked (or more often forced) to abandon their own lands in exchange for money. In *Tracks*, most of the characters rejected the white attitudes and maneuvers as a consequence of this Act. Nanapush, for instance, shows his dislike for whites and criticizes them throughout the whole novel. Nonetheless, there is one character that clearly represents the opposition to

the Chippewa's widespread opinion against white population: Pauline Puyat.

Pauline is a clear example of the mixed-blood condition in and within Native American tribes. She supports the white mainstream beliefs, which causes Pauline to be rejected by her own community, which, in turn, facilitates her conversion to Christianity. Her inclination emerges from the fact that Pauline finds in whiteness a way of escape from her dual and hybrid identity. She joins a convent, where she finds a welcoming institution that makes her feel valued and valuable. The more Pauline approaches whiteness and Christianity, the more she is rejected by the Chippewa. The fact that she is being rejected, despised and isolated by her own original tribe throughout the novel, together with her lack of a feeling of belonging, makes her an increasingly unstable and traumatized character. In addition, her strong desire to become white and to belong to mainstream whiteness and Christianity results in Pauline having some hallucinations that end up hurting the Anishinaabe. She eventually murders a member of the tribe. The aim of this paper is to analyze Pauline Puyat's liminal and hybrid identity and its negative impact on her psyche by probing into the Anishinaabe's and Pauline's attitudes to one another, as well as into her obsession with whiteness and Catholic religion.

1. Definitions and implications of liminality

Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* takes place during the first decades of the 20th century when American Natives gradually witness the expropriation of their lands. As expected, their frustration grows as they witness the loss of their land, and the spread of the smallpox epidemic becomes another cause to blame the white government for their discontent. However, and in contrast with the rest of the characters in the novel, Pauline supports this mainstream colonial attitude and decides to adopt cultural whiteness and Catholicism, becoming the main liminal character in *Tracks*.

Bamber *et al.* describe liminality as “a state of being betwixt and between [...] Permanent liminality refers to a state of being neither-this-nor-that, or both-this-and-that” (1514). That is, the concept of “liminality” stands for the situation in which a character belongs to two different worlds and to neither of them at the same time. According to the liminality theory posed originally by Arnold Van Gennep, when a person participates of two identities, and moves from one to the other, the individual follows a three-stage process. This process is “subdivided into *rites of separation*, *transition rites*, and *rites of incorporation*”(10–11). In *Tracks*, Van Gennep's division is clear. Regarding the first stage, the split between the Anishinaabe and Pauline becomes obvious when she abandons the physical tribe and moves to a white town, Argus, where she begins her transition to whiteness. On this central liminal point, Pauline is moving back and forth between both the Native and the white communities until she finally concludes the process of acculturation and conversion to Catholicism and she changes her name to Leopolda. In short, liminality is a position that marks

the limits of Pauline's identity until she follows a three-stop transition and becomes culturally white. This conversion, triggered mainly by the rejections and humiliations she suffers at the hands of the Chippewa members makes her psychologically unstable.

Pauline and Her "In-Betweenness"

Pauline's father is Native-American born, whereas her mother is of Canadian descent. Thus, she is trapped between two different worlds, the Native American and the white one. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that she embraces what is typically known as white culture, she does not fully feel like she belongs to either of them at the beginning of the novel. This "limbo" situation fosters the emergence of negative thoughts and emotions within her mind. As Kate McCafferty points out, "Erdrich clarifies the myriad of difficulties that shape Pauline's behavior. Problems stemming from both Indian and mainstream expectations, physical and psychological propensities [...] work to 'produce' Pauline as a contextual being" (740). Assuming that the liminal position with which Pauline is involved produces negative effects on her, it becomes clear throughout Louise Erdrich's book that her continuous "comings and goings" between those two worlds, typical of the transition stage defined by Van Gennepe, create lack of acceptance and understanding, and emotional instability. Together with McCafferty, Susan S. Friedman agrees that "in colonized peoples, the internalized caste system of value results in racial neurosis and psychopathology" (112). Pauline tries to embrace the white culture together with Catholicism, but she does it at the same time she rejects and despises the Anishinaabe. By being surrounded by whiteness, Pauline unintentionally learns and apprehends the mainstream idea that being white means being superior to Native Americans. Moreover, in her obsessive attempt to leave behind her liminal condition and, therefore, her Native American heritage, she acts in an aggressive manner due to the consequent emotional and mental instability that that attempt unleashes in her.

2. Interrelationship between the Anishinaabe and Pauline

Throughout *Tracks*, the negative attitudes that the Anishinaabe members show towards Pauline are more than evident. Nanapush, mainly, is the character whose scorn towards Pauline is paradigmatic. As a way of illustrating this idea, he recognizes that the tribe in general and him in particular do not take Pauline into account: "She was, to my mind, a mixture of ingredients [...] 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" (Erdrich 39). The tribe acts indifferent towards her due to her hybrid self, as it is common in most Native American communities. As noted by Sidner Larson, the white race is considered the most dangerous because of its 'acquisitiveness.' Mixed-bloods are

considered racially alien and therefore capable of causing full- blood [...] Indians to contract 'the foreign illness'. [...] As a result, mixed-blood infants were sometimes killed, or, if they were permitted to survive, their fate was harsh: They were rejected [...] and shunned by the rest of the tribe (4).

We, therefore, see two processes developing at the same time. Colonialism is considered as a disease in the sense that, due to its power of taking away the lands and properties from Native Americans, it could destroy the tribe. As their rejection towards the white population increases, so does the marginalization of Pauline because of her half-white identity. Notwithstanding, Pauline is also aware and conscious of her marginalization and isolation. When she decides to finally leave behind the Chippewa, she states that "I knew I would not see Pillagers, Kashpaws, or old Nanapush again [...], and they would not miss me" (Erdrich 196), which reinforces the idea that she knows that she is being despised and isolated, something that propels her to embrace her whiteness as a way of surviving the oppression that the Anishinaabe exercise upon her. As Larson confirms, "mixed-blood Indian people occupy a marginal position in an already marginalized culture" (1). The relationship between the Anishinaabe and Pauline also seems to be a circular structure of power. The white colonialists marginalize the Natives, and the Natives deprecate Pauline, who supports the white population. Once she believes she is a proper white, she belittles her own tribe.

What is more, Pauline eventually states that her Native community "treated me as they would a white. I was ignored most of the time. When they did address me they usually spoke English" (Erdrich 145, 146). Pauline seems to be content when the Chippewa talk to her in English, as they would do with a white person, which reinforces Pauline's eagerness to become white. This instance has been analyzed, however, as an example of irony. As P. Jane Hafen suggests, "Nanapush, Fleur, and the Kashpaws [...] manipulate and tease her, ignore her or speak only English to her" (85). Pauline prefers to approach them in English, rather than in their Native language, to show them her both her whiteness and her willingness to abandon the Native-American traits that are still within her, including language. The Anishinaabe use Pauline as the target of their veto of mainstream whiteness. In this case, this rejection is linguistic, as they talk to her in the white colonial language with the aim of mocking her. Along the same lines, Punyashree Panda affirms that "Pauline takes pride in the fact that the Chippewa talk to her in English rather than in the Native tongue, and in her unlearning of skills integral to Native life" (6), which reinforces Pauline's positive response to being considered as a white person. Pauline denies, in sum, every aspect of Native Americanism in her identity, and through language she tries to demonstrate (and also convince) the Chippewa that she is, in actuality, a white person.

Pauline's Response and Assimilation

An example of this rupture of every link she has with the tribe is her connection with water. Although at a first glance it might seem outlandish, the significance of water for the Chippewa tribe is evident in *Tracks*. In one instance, Pauline meets with Nanapush in his home and he prepares tea to drink while they chat. They drink tea and, after drinking a great number of cups, Pauline has the urge to go to the toilet. However, she refuses to urinate because, for her, this act is a distinctive Native action that she should avoid so she can break away from her mixed-blood origins. In other words, she strongly tries not to go to the toilet as a symbol of her rejection of the Chippewa, because she somehow believes that urinating is vulgar and that white people do not use other people's restrooms. Additionally, in another illustration Pauline is proving her faith to God by not washing herself. Fleur washes her fiercely, and Pauline shows reticence because she is focused on showing God her sacrifices, as she considers that God will allow her to become and be embraced as a fully-white woman. Nanapush takes this opportunity to criticize white people by accusing Pauline of being "more and more like the whites who never wash themselves clean!" (Erdrich 153). This episode underlies, paraphrasing Punyashree Panda, a parallel action of what the Natives were doing: cleansing whiteness, assimilation and colonialism from their Native American tribes. Consequently, Fleur washes her to, metaphorically and symbolically, eliminate Pauline's whiteness, because she is considered a white and not a Native by her own tribe.

Finally, it is interesting to note how the same author emphasizes that "as the story of a mixed-blood narrator, Pauline's narrative is complicated, reflecting both her cowardice and her desire" (8). Because she is confused due to her liminality and hybridity, Pauline is constantly moving between those two identities and worlds and shows different *modus operandi* depending on the situation. At the beginning of *Tracks*, when Pauline is with Fleur in Argus and witnesses Fleur's rape, she decides to become 'invisible' because she affirms that "the men would not have seen me no matter what I did" (Erdrich 19). She takes advantage of her invisibility to take a step back on Fleur's rape with the aim of not being treated equally. In P. Jane Hafen's view, "Pauline survives through her reliance on Native American traditions [...] In Argus, she can disappear into the background, becoming invisible like many minorities" (84). Pauline, hence, uses her "lowly" liminal position as a Native American to become invisible among the white men of Argus so as to survive and avoid that violent episode. She witnesses Fleur's rape and, afraid of being raped as well, she decides to become invisible to men in order to save herself.

3. Pauline's acculturation / transculturation and christian conversion

Throughout the novel, Pauline's discourse focuses on her conversion to Christianity and her identification with white culture. Merriam Webster's Dictionary defines transculturation as "a process of cultural transformation marked by the influx of new culture elements and the loss or alteration of existing ones". In addition, Bill Ashcroft *et al.* describe it as the resulting process whereby "subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (7). Thus, the concept of transculturation is clearly related to Pauline in that she belongs at first to a marginal community, the Chippewa, and from the white world she selects aspects of Christian religion typically associated with the white predominant culture and creates, in the end, what is usually referred to as a "contact zone" of cultural and religious influences. According to Mary Louise Pratt, the "contact zone" is a space where different cultures meet in relationships of dominance and subordination (4). That is, by accessing these two cultures in the contact zone that she, metaphorically, creates, Pauline finds in the white culture her only choice to leave the emotional and psychological instabilities behind. It is important to mention the differences between acculturation and transculturation. The former stands for the apprehension of traits of the new culture by being in contact with it, while the latter takes into account the loss of the original identity (partially or totally) and the incorporation of the new one.

Moreover, it seems noteworthy to mention that the concepts of liminality and transculturation, when blended, define and describe the assimilation to one of the identities and the withdrawal from the other one. In *Tracks*, this is evident when Pauline adopts the mainstream whiteness and abandons her Native origin. On the first section of the book, Pauline is warned about the dangers of leaving the Native community and the consequences that her liminal state could create: after having a conversation with her father, who—after being told that she was going to the white town, Argus—says: "You won't be an Indian once you return" (Erdrich 14). In response, she affirms "I wanted to be like my mother, who showed her half-white. I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian" (14). Here, Pauline insists on her initial thoughts of abandoning her half-Native American identity and strongly appeals to become "not one speck of Indian but wholly white" (137), which reaffirms, once again, her willingness to become a white convert.

Pauline's Power over the Anishinaabe (Fleur as the Example)

As Pauline becomes more involved in the white culture, she tends to show some superior and colonial attitudes toward her old Native tribe. White colonialism was based on a dominant/dominated relationship, as re-presented in the novel. Pauline

has been rejected and isolated by the Chippewa because of her mixed-blood. However, once Pauline feels empowered by her white acculturation process and, consequently, by her newly acquired whiteness, she tends to show a sense of superiority and power over the main character of *Tracks*, Fleur. In Anthony Piccolo's words, "Fleur is everything that Pauline is not: attractive, charismatic, confident, aware of who she is and proud of her Indian heritage. Pauline is [...] caught between wanting to be Fleur and wishing to destroy Fleur" (126). Pauline is, *de facto*, overshadowed by Fleur, as she is half-breed and despised by the tribe for that same reason. Despite of being rejected, when Pauline feels that she is an actual white acculturated, she goes back to the Anishinaabe tribe at times. As Pauline sees that Fleur is valued and loved by everyone in the community, she becomes jealous of her, and, eventually, the former undertakes different actions to have power over the latter. These deeds can be interpreted as a parallel of the dominance / subordination relationship between white colonialism and Native American tribes that has been mentioned before. In actuality, Michelle R. Hessler strongly affirms that "Pauline's ultimate goal is to assert dominance over Fleur. As a member of the reservation community, Pauline is inferior to Fleur, but as a member of the cloister she belongs to the mainstream Christian community, which repeatedly dispossess the Anishinabeg." (42) This can be seen in Pauline's desire to break Eli (Fleur's boyfriend) and Fleur's relationship. She meticulously elaborates a plan to this end, and involves Sophie (a member of the tribe) in it. Pauline says that "I filled her head with ideas, told her how Eli looked at her, what I saw. It was almost too simple, that part, it took no thought or work" (Erdrich 81). As Pauline plans to hurt Fleur, she is using her half-white from her liminal and hybrid identity to exert power over Fleur by using, ironically, a love potion typical from the Native-American folklore. Therefore, Pauline is taking advantage again of her duality to hurt Fleur. As Daniel Cornell suggests, "In her jealousy over the love between Eli and Fleur, Pauline seeks a substitute body in her young cousin Sophie [...] Pauline believes herself actually to be orchestrating the sex between the lovers" (56). That is, by showing agency on the sexual encounter that Eli and Sophie will end up having and, consequently, destroying Fleur's relationship, she feels that she is dominating Fleur's life.

Pauline as a Fanatic Christian. From Pauline Puyat to Leopolda

Pauline's religious journey is based on her conversion from the Native-American "pagan" rites to Catholicism. When she fully converts to Christianity, Pauline does not find any prejudice at the convent because of her liminal status. Rather, she joins the convent following the well-known Christian principle of hospitality. According to Emma Pavey, "Hospitality seems to be God's *modus operandi* [...] God promises that 'if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you

with me'." (Rev. 3:20) Pauline affirms that she hears God's voice and sees Christianity as her means to escape from the hybrid identity that negatively affects her, as she is embraced and socially accepted in the convent. Pauline finds there, in consequence, the acceptance she did not find among the Chippewa. When talking about God, Pauline states that "He said that I was not whom I had supposed [...] He had an important plan for me, for which I must prepare, that I should find out the habits and hiding places of His enemy [...] I should not turn my back on Indians" (Erdrich 137). His enemy, for her, is, on a large scale, the Anishinaabe community, which has a connection with a devilish monster in a lake near their tribe. God's plan for Pauline is, she believes, that of Christianizing them and, thus, exorcising them from the devilish monster and rites they profess. By way of illustration, this Christianization that Pauline tries to impose on the Indian tribe can be seen when she attends Fleur's labor. Referring to the newborn, Pauline assures that "He gave me the mission to name and baptize, to gather souls" (Erdrich 140, 141). Pauline's aim is to baptize Fleur's child, as God has told her to do so. Yet, she is unable to do it. As Kate McCafferty points out, "Pauline attempts to take the child's heart through baptism as an offering for her new "God"; but, Fleur knocks her to the ground" (745). Again, the Anishinaabe, here represented in the figure of Fleur, rejects Pauline for her recent Christian conversion by aggressively hitting her. This unilateral point of view of Christianity that Pauline has, together with the lack of human affection that she feels because of the rejection by the Chippewa, leads her eventually to become obsessed and to show some psychological turmoil.

In her quest to prove that she is a good Christian and that she deserves to be considered by the Christian God as such, together with her willingness to eliminate God's enemy (the lake monster), Pauline commits an actual murder in a moment of hallucination. In Larson's assessment, "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" (10, 11). This notion of fanaticism noted by Larson is clearly seen in Napoleon's murder, another Anishinaabe member. Pauline explains and justifies this killing by saying that "there was no guilt [...], no fault. How could I have known what body the devil would assume?" (Erdrich 203). Therefore, Pauline not only recognizes that she kills Napoleon, but the character also recognizes that she is not aware of what happened because she believes Napoleon is the lake monster, which she is supposed to fight against. The fact that Pauline is trapped in a "limbo" between the white and the Indian worlds results in this neurotic episode in which she ends up killing an innocent man caused by the emotional and mental instability she suffers from.

It also seems remarkable to mention that at the very end of her narrative, Pauline decides to change her name to Leopolda so as to fully embrace her whiteness and leave behind, once and for all, her Native American traits. She states that "I asked for the grace to accept, to leave Pauline behind, to remember that my name [...] was no

more than a crumbling skin. *Leopolda*. I tried out the unfamiliar syllables. They fit. They cracked in my ears like a fist through ice.” (Erdrich 205) Joining the convent permanently is Pauline’s way of finally abandoning her hybrid and liminal identity. She decides to deny and forget her half-Indian ancestry, and to embrace her white identity. In Panda’s words, “This act symbolizes Pauline’s ultimate disconnection with her past,” (9) which summarizes and confirms Pauline’s identity transition as a coping mechanism.

Conclusions

The results of this study discussing Pauline Puyat’s disturbed mind have been thoroughly proven by delving deep into the identity challenges she faces in the novel and the damage she suffers from the Anishinaabe for her mixed-blood condition. Pauline Puyat has been analyzed in depth as *Track’s* main dual and hybrid character. Because of her liminal identity, she is stuck between two different cultures. On the one hand, it has been discussed the ways in which the Native American Anishinaabe tribe marginalizes her because of her liminal situation as a half-breed, which triggers her efforts to become a white convert who denies her Native ancestry. However, she constantly goes back and forth to the Anishinaabe, what underlies a latent interest in them which she will fight to get rid of. Thus, at the end of the novel Pauline joins a convent, where she feels approved, accepted, and, of course, not judged. On her proving herself to God, she becomes obsessed with Catholicism and the fight against the devil, an element that, in conjunction with her emotional instability, makes of Pauline a psychologically unstable character. Her actions and behaviors are the compendium of her liminal state, as she does not find her place anywhere and she feels entrapped in a limbo until she begins to believe that Christianity and whiteness will embrace her and see whiteness as her only way to escape from the social isolation and marginalization she suffers from. At the end of *Tracks*, as it has been analyzed, she seems to find her place on mainstream Christianity by changing her name to Leopolda and fully embracing her so-desired whiteness.

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