

# THE WHITE MAN'S CATHOLICISM VERSUS CHIPPEWA PRACTICES IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *TRACKS*

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## **Abstract**

*The history of colonization throughout the world shows religion as the primary alibi of the colonizers. An imported religion that not only disrupts local religious considerations but, worse, demands their disappearance, often creating tensions and conflicts between indigenous populations and colonizers, as well as between the former and their own beliefs. This reflection aims to demonstrate how L. Erdrich, in her work *Tracks* (1988), through carefully chosen characters, spaces, and historical periods, illustrates the manifestation of Christianity alongside Indian beliefs. Fleur Pillager and Pauline Puyat are seen as the two agents carrying these different religious visions. The use of postcolonial theory, seen as the short and long-term consequence of colonization, will be useful for us to see to what extent it has contributed to the destruction of Indian beliefs among certain Indians. It is important to underline that in this work, we can use the word "Anishinabe/ Anishinaabe" in the place of "Chippewa".*

**Keywords:** Beliefs, Whites, Indians, Rejection, Self-affirmation.

## **Résumé**

*L'histoire de toute colonisation à travers le monde, montre la religion comme étant l'alibi majeur des colonisateurs. Une religion importée qui, non seulement perturbe les considérations religieuses locales mais pire exige leur disparition, créant très souvent des tensions et conflits entre les populations autochtones et les colonisateurs d'une part et d'autre part, entre les premiers et leurs propres croyances. La présente réflexion se donne pour objectif de montrer comment L. Erdrich, dans *Tracks* (1988), à travers des personnages, des espaces et des périodes historiques, sagement choisis, démontre la manifestation du christianisme aux côtés des croyances indiennes. Fleur Pillager et Pauline Puyat sont vus comme les deux agents porteurs de ces différentes visions religieuses. L'emploi de la théorie postcoloniale, vue comme la conséquence à court et long terme de la colonisation nous sera utile pour voir dans quelle mesure celle-ci a contribué à la destruction des croyances indiennes chez certains Indiens. Dans ce travail, nous utiliserons souvent le mot "Anishinabe/ Anishinaabe" en lieu et place de "Chippewa".*

**Mots clés :** Croyances, Blancs, Indiens, Rejection, Affirmation de soi.

## Introduction

History teaches us that Europeans evocate two alibis for the indigenous: to civilize and to Christianize. According to World History Encyclopedia (2022),

Civilization (from the Latin *civis* = citizen and *civitas* = city) is a term applied to any society which has developed a writing system, government, production of surplus food, division of labor, and urbanization. The term is difficult to define because not all 'civilizations' include every one of the above facets. The term is often used, therefore, to suggest a highly developed culture. (J.J. Mark, *Civilization*, <https://www.worldhistory.org/civilization/>)

It defines the word "christianization" as "the acceptance of christianity (in its Eastern Orthodox form) by the political elite of the early Rus principalities and its imposition upon the rest of the population at the end of the tenth century".

From these definitional approaches we understand that, in short, civilizing is linked to social organization while Christianizing boils down to cultural organization. From then on, we see the dispossession of everything that expresses their identity as Indians—namely their social organization and their gods—as the sole fact of this civilization and of this Christianization. However, it should be emphasized that Christianization functioned as the compass, the very pathfinder of this civilization. For, according to the white men, the Indians, deemed savage, did not know God because they had no religion. From this point of view, religion can be seen as the cornerstone of the confrontation between Europeans and Indians : while the former consider the latter godless, the latter uphold deities and ancestral spirits that sustain and guide their lifestyle.

Religion has long been apprehended by scholars, either as a quest of a supreme being to solve human problems or as a means of

identification of a specific society. In any case, religion is directly connected to God and differently understood by human communities. Religion imposes on people the worshipping of this God, differently named, across communities. The Indians do not believe in a single being called God, as defined in some traditions. They believe in [the] nature with which they maintain an inextricable connection. But, this perfect harmony between the Indian and the nature is perturbed by the sudden presence of the Europeans. With this arrival, the Indians' religion is marginalized in favor of the white man's; a reality depicted by Louise Erdrich and mentioned in most of her literary works. *Tracks* (1988) is a living example of this class her attractive fiction.

Published in 1988, this novel of 226 pages divided into nine chapters, starts with Nanapush's narration of what happened to the Anishinabe in winter 1912, a period that also marks a capital point in the Indians' history due to laws enacted by the Federal government, dispossessing Indians of their lands. As important agents of their culture, losing the lands becomes significant to the practice of their traditional ceremonies conveyed through their spirituality. The story ends with Nanapush as well, between Fall 1919 and Spring 1924, which mark the Americanization of the Indians: in 1919, World War I veterans were granted American citizenship, and the grant was extended to all citizens in 1924. Each chapter plays a significant role in the narrative, which takes place on the Chippewa reservation, in North Dakota, near the fictional white town called Argus. Through *Tracks* (1988), Erdrich intends to retrace the story of her own community; an attempt that can be understood as a call for the new generation to continue to perceive the history of their tribe and relive their ancestors' spirits through the practice of what remains of their culture.

The story in *Tracks* (1988) is alternatively told by Nanapush and Pauline Puyat, who sometimes tell the same story differently. Nanapush is seen as the voice of tradition because he is strictly attached to the Indian ways while Pauline, this mixed heritage young woman reflects the European shadow, because she is obviously denying her Indian practices in favor of the white man's Catholicism.

This perception clearly introduces how Indian religions have been victimized by Europeans, while showing, at the same time, how writers like Louise Erdrich have sought to depict the impact of colonization through literature, leading to the topic "The White Man's Catholicism

Versus Chippewa Practices in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*". In fact, according to *American Indians and Christianity, The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*:

Church leaders and politicians alike believed that conversion to Christianity would quickly, humanely, and permanently solve the Indian question. Indeed, in 1869 the Board of Indian Commissioners noted in its annual report that where assimilating Indians was concerned, "the religion of our blessed Savior is . . . the most effective agent for the civilization of any people. (C. Ellis, 2010, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=AM011>.)

A good, large and clear comprehension of this topic raises the following questions: how, in *Tracks* does Erdrich hint at the presence of Catholicism and Indian belief? To what extent does the white man's religion impact the Indian ways? Did the Indians, in *Tracks* (1988), passively allow themselves to be submerged by this foreign religion? Indeed, Erdrich raises the problem of the complexity of religious exchange in *Tracks*, demonstrating that the interplay between Catholicism and Indigenous beliefs is not merely conflict but a dynamic of negotiation that enables both resilience and transformation. Such interplay is backed by the mechanisms (narrative strategies, character agency, and institutional pressures) through which this religious negotiation shapes Indians' identity, cultural survival, and resistance on the reservation?

Given that *Tracks* is considered as a story that paints the immediate drawbacks of colonization, the postcolonial theory will be relevant here to help find suitable answers to the questions above. But what is the postcolonial theory about? For Young (2003: 2), "Postcolonial theory is, first and foremost, a body of writing that attempts to challenge the dominant ways of thinking about the relations between western and non-western peoples". Thus, postcolonialism, here, seems to be focused on the relationship between the colonizer and the

colonized without taking into account any idea of a specific period. That idea leads us to Kohn and Reddy (2022), who highlight the prefix "post". For them, this prefix "doesn't imply that it is simply a system that comes after colonialism. More precisely, postcolonialism is a reaction to the practices of imperialism and European colonial rule". Here, the notion of time is systematically rejected. Beyond these two views of colonialism, Raja (2015) adds a crucial information :

At times, the term postcolonial studies may be preferred to *postcolonialism*, as the ambiguous term *colonialism* could refer either to a system of government, or to an ideology or world view underlying that system. However, *postcolonialism* (i.e., postcolonial studies) generally represents an ideological response to colonialist thought, rather than simply describing a system that comes after colonialism, as the prefix *post-* may suggest. (<https://masoodraja.com/introduction-to-postcolonialism/>).

These different aspects of postcolonialism drive us to reconsider L. Erdrich's *Tracks*, in light of the impact of colonization on the Anishinabe people. This reconsideration questions the way she uses Fleur Pillager and Pauline Puyat as means of expression of, respectively, the Indian beliefs and the white man's Christianity. The journeys and crossing over of Fleur Pillager, Pauline Puyat and Nanapush bring into the limelight the opposition between Indians' beliefs and the white man's Catholicism. Pauline has chosen her whiteness through her grandfather and Nanapush has chosen his Indinness, as the eldest of the remaining members of the tribe, after the consumption epidemic. Their different choices say a lot about the shaping of the colonizer-colonized interactions. All the preceding arguments make the postcolonial framework a relevant theoretical tool to scrutinize the religious conflict unveiled in Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988).

This analysis proceeds with a three-level plan: the first part, titled 'Two Opposing Religious Systems on the same Land', investigates to what extent the white man's religion has influenced the Indians'

traditional practices. The second part titled ‘Adapting or Rejecting Catholicism’ questions the Anishinabe’s position vis-à-vis this imported religion and the third axis titled ‘Fighting for the Preservation of the Anishinabe spiritual Realities’ is where Erdrich appeals to Indian consciousness through Fleur Pillager.

## 1. Two Opposing Religious Systems on the same Land

Historically, strange strangers identified as Europeans have invaded the Indian territories since 1492, bringing with them a lifestyle, strange to that of the original inhabitants. They called that civilization, illuminated by a religion, strange to that of the Indians; creating a kind of challenge throughout the American history, depicted in L. Erdrich’s *Tracks*. Civilization brings modern ways of life that visibly contrast with the Indians’ traditional ways; a reality clearly perceived by Chandigarh (2014) in *Tradition and Modernity*, where he underlines that: “Tradition and modernity seem poles apart because of their different values”. And, in any human civilization, God, in any form, represents a capital and fundamental value for populations. While Europeans discuss religion through a single God, some peoples, like the Indians, perceive a Supreme Being in each element of the nature.

Throughout the American history, the Europeans’ presence has impacted the Indians’ existence — socially, culturally, economically and even demographically; a reality underlined by Adoupo (1988: 4-14) as “the expression of Whiteness” in his article “Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*: the expression of whiteness and Indianness”. Religion, as a pillar of culture, is then shaped by this white supremacy in *Tracks* (1988), although Erdrich does not directly introduce it as a fragrant element, the churches in Argus, Father Damien, Pauline’s grimaces and terms like priests, nun, convent, Virgin Marie, confessions, prayers, mass, Cross of Myrtlewood, and conversions in the text are true relevant elements of Catholicism:

[...] 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. (1988 : 13)

.....

We start dying before the snow,  
and like the snow, we continue  
to fall. ... The consumption, it  
was called by young father  
Damien, who came in that year  
to replace the priest who  
succumbed to the same  
devastation as his flock (1988 : 1-  
2).

Visibly, in *Tracks* (1988), the white man's religion coexisted with the tribal religion long before the disease that has devastated, the Indian population. But Pauline Puyat seems to be the one who really awakens the reader's conscience about the coexistence of two different religions, making her attitude another living case of Catholicism's impact upon Erdrich's Anishinabe characters in her novel. Pauline Puyat becomes then the crack through which the white man's religion will visibly manifest, challenging the Indians' traditional beliefs in *Tracks* (1988).

This preoccupation will find its answer in the Indians' reactions to the introduction of a new religion. The Indians show that in their religion, a fundamental element of their traditional way of perceiving life, ceremonies, sacrifices, prayers, incantations and even songs in the name of natural things are symbolic. Adoupo (2018), in his article "Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*: The Expression of Whiteness and Indianness", calls that spiritual expression of the Indians "Indianness" which is, according to him, the "perception of being an Indian socially, culturally and spiritually" (2018 : 4-14). Through characters like Nanapush, Margaret and her sons, and especially Fleur Pillager, Erdrich, manifestly, introduces and exposes what can be seen as the Indian spirituality. A spirituality connected to the expression of their traditional belonging, evident in their belief in powers that inhabit the living nature, affirming their identity and refusing to hybridize their traditional heritage with the western culture.

The Indians are said by Europeans to be godless people, because, contrary to them, what can be seen as religion for the former is the connection with natural things. Krishna, (2010 : 1) emphasizes,

saying that: "The lepchas, hunter-gatherers of Sikkim, believe that everything in the environment is of spiritual significance". They even organize specific ceremonies to celebrate nature. According to Lawrence, in her article "The Symbolic Role of Animals in the Plains Indian Sun Dance", the purpose of that ceremony was, in general, to reconnect with nature: "the rite celebrates renewal, the spiritual rebirth of participants and their relatives... the sun dance reflects relationship with nature" (1993 : 17). In fact, like many other people in the world, the Indians are known to believe in a supernatural existence that is manifested through natural elements such as the Lake, the Forest, the Mountain, the Land, the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, the Rain and the animals; each having a specific importance in their lives. The following reflections are true examples of the Indians' faith in nature rather than in a God located somewhere in the sky, ready to judge people. For Bear (1978 : 197), "The old Lakota was wise. He knew that a man's heart away from nature becomes hard", contrasting with Christians who believe that a supreme being is somewhere, in the sky who should be worshipped.

Christians think that their God has given the earth to human beings : "Let us make man in Our image, after Our likeness, to rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, and over all the earth itself and every creature that crawls upon it." (The Holy Bible, Genesis 1 : 26), but Crazy Horse confidently warns : "Treat the earth well : it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children. We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children" (Erdrich, 1988 : 17). Christians believe in life after death, with a place called paradise for those who had worshiped God during their lifetime and another place called hell filled of fire to burn those who did not worship. Tecumseh did not hear that, he told his people: "live your life that the fear of death can never enter your heart" (p.17), because Chief Seattle ensured then that "there is no death, only a change of worlds" (p.17). A change of worlds that Black Elk views as a simple circle like the seasons: "Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing and always come back again to where they were. The life of a person is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves" (p.17). The Catholic Bible establishes Ten Commandments to regulate Christians' life according to God's will:

1 – You shall have no other gods before Me. (Exodus 20:3)



- 2 – You shall not make for yourself a carved image. (Exodus 20:4)
- 3 – You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. (Exodus 20:7)
- 4 - Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. (Exodus 20:8)
- 5 - Honor your father and your mother. (Exodus 20:12)
- 6 - You shall not murder. (Exodus 20:13)
- 7 - You shall not commit adultery. (Exodus 20:14)
- 8 - You shall not steal. (Exodus 20:15)
- 9 - You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. (Exodus 20:16)
- 10 - You shall not covet. (Exodus 20:17)

On the sidelines of these biblical recommendations, Indians establish their own Ten Commandments according to nature's laws underlined in "100 Native American Quotes about the Indian Way of Life" (Pearce, 2023):

- 1- Treat the Earth and all that dwell therein with respect
- 2- Remain close to the Great Spirit
- 3- Show great respect for your fellow beings
- 4- Work together for the benefit of all Mankind
- 5- Give assistance and kindness wherever needed
- 6- Do what you know to be right
- 7- Look after the well-being of Mind and Body
- 8- Dedicate a share of your efforts to the greater Good
- 9- Be truthful and honest at all times
- 10- Take full responsibility for your actions

In *Tracks* (1988), Nanapush seems to place great trust in his tradition through this statement: "Later that day, Father Damien heard of our troubles and brought some butter which I spread on your frostbitten cheeks. He also brought along another something I did not want, the off-reservation doctor (p. 167). What really highlights Nanapush's confidence in his Indianness in that part of the statement is the extract "He also brought along another something I did not want, the off-reservation doctor". On page 188, he even prided himself for his mastering of old

technics. The following illustration hints widely at Nanapush's traditional abilities to truly incarnate the Indian culture.

There are two plants. One is yarrow and the other I will not name. These are the source of my medicine, and I used them for the second time on Fleur, the third time on a pillager. Only because of Pauline I didn't complete the job. I mixed and crushed the ingredients. The past must be rubbed on the hands a certain way, then up to the elbows with the exact words.  
(p. 188)

Unfortunately, the story in *Tracks* (1988) begins in 1919, reminding us that the Indians have long been immersed by European presence, which visibly jeopardizes the survival of Indian beliefs, or placing them at a crossroads: denying the Indian spiritual realities in profit of the white man's religion, or persisting in what they have inherited from their ancestors.

## 2. Adapting or Rejecting Catholicism

In the introduction of this work, we have first of all highlighted that colonization brought in the Indian world civilization and Christianity; with the hidden intention to decimate indigenous realities, including their spiritual legacy. In other words, the Indians are forced to leave their traditional spiritual practices to adapt a God brought by the white man. In *Tracks* (1988), Erdrich depicts that fact and succeeds in creating characters who, with no remorse, embrace this new monotheist religion called Christianity, which aims to exalt a cult to a single God through Jesus Christ, who is said to be his only son who died for humanity's sins. She creates Pauline Puyat as a living example of this lost Indian to denounce the impact of this religion on the Indians. Anyway, Pauline has always denied her Indianness in the name of a so-called mixed-bloodness: "I wanted to be like my mother, who showed her half-white. I wanted to be

like my grandfather, pure Canadian” (p. 14). This conception is also reflected in Orijji’s analysis of Nanapush and Pauline. She asserts that: “Pauline ambivalence leads her to reject the Anishinabe culture to experience the clash of culture between the Anishinabe and the white” (1988 : 38). Thus, according to L. Owens (1992 : 69): “the Church’s single-minded desire that the Indian become as Europeanized as possible”.

In her manifest will to show her whiteness by embracing Catholicism, Pauline Puyat behaves beyond mere religious practices, maybe perhaps to attract the attention of other characters, especially the Anishinabe, or to manifestly mock their spiritual beliefs. She spends days and nights fasting and praying, doing, she says, the will of God: “I had starved myself for so long that I had no way of knowing, when I first felt the movement, how far back to count. So I did not know when I would bear it. And since I had already betroth myself to God” (Erdrich, 1988 : 131). For her, the practice of Catholicism demands strict imitation of Jesus Christ. Thus, by challenging Misshepesu, she sees herself, as Christ “in the desert” (p. 193). In her attempt to resemble Christ, she sometimes exaggerates. For example, she wears her shoes on the wrong feet as a “reminder of Christ’s imprisonment” (p. 146). When referring to Pauline and her conversion, M. R. Hessler says : “To become an assimilate Catholic, Pauline strives towards being the most humble, self-sacrificing nun on the reservation” (p. 42).

She is almost ready to suffer more for her new religion, for the sake of Christ. This indeed underlines the absolute influence of that religion over Pauline in *Tracks* (1988), and, by ricochet, all the Indian who first submitted to Christianity. Pauline Puyat, through evangelization, made herself the conveyer of Christ’s message, even cursing Indians’ beliefs, considering anything coming from the Indian culture satanic. That is why she impedes Nanapush from exercising his medicinal ability on Pillagers. Nanapush said: “There are two plants. One is yarrow and the other I will not name. These are the source of my medicine, and I used them for the second time on Fleur, the third time on a pillager. Only because of Pauline I didn’t complete the job” (p. 188). To help the Indians avoid such practices, she says: “I should not turn my back on Indians. I should go out among them” (p. 137) and tell them what is desired by God, because she “was chosen to serve” (p. 137). She thinks evangelization is what these people strongly need. In her zeal of evangelization, she refuses to recognize her child and Napeoleon as her husband because she claims:

“I will be the bride and Christ will take me as wife, without death” (p. 204). Finally, her pursuit of the white man’s Catholicism “betrothed herself to God” (p. 131), and she was given a new name — (Sister) Leopolda, according catholic prescription and was allowed to “teach arithmetic at St. Catherine’s school in Argus” (p. 205).

In *Tracks* (1988), Fleur Pillager follows her path while shaping her relationship with Pauline Puyat. In fact, in front of the advent of Christianity, Tecumseh, in his poem “Live Your Life”, online by Emma Baldwin, warns the white and the Indians as well: “Trouble no one about their religion; respect others in their view and demand that they respect yours”. She chooses to respect Pauline’s choice and follows the tracks of the old Pillagers. She considers Matchmanito as her innate environment, its lake and forest as her providers and its monster Meshipeshu as her protector. Thus, without cursing Jesus Christ and His Father in the sky, waiting for people to judge them, she continues to believe according Chef Seattle’s prescription enumerated in “The Top 25 Native American Spiritual Quotes (of 59)”: “the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does it to himself”. The first sentence of this quotation contrasts with the Christians’ view because it does not consider the earth as a gift of God to the humanity, but rather sees human as a property of the earth. The second sentence does not promote difference between humans and nature but emphasizes their close interconnection. And the last sentence conclude that, because of this connection, it is advises the respect of all the things of the nature, that is fundamental to the Indian spirituality. By her profound confidence in nature, Fleur Pillager clearly chooses the Anishinabe polytheism.

In the impossibility of choosing strictly between Christianity and the Indians’ beliefs, “many Native Americans have embraced the Church while still valuing their indigenous heritage” (The Resilience of Native American Catholicism, Catholic World Report), concretizing Bhabha’s idea (2017 : 32): “a complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized”. In *Tracks* Margaret Kashpaw and Nanapush seem to be the prototype of this category of Indians. For, although presenting herself as a practitioner of the Indians realities, Margaret used to frequent Father Damien’s church, carrying with her Nanapush, her new companion ; invoking a

religious intermixing in *Tracks*, like Erdrich who 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 : 1).

In fact, Nanapush had "a Jesuit education in the halls of Saint John" (Erdrich, 1988 : 33) before he returned to the reservation. This mixed-culture experiences permitted him to understand both White and Anishinabe beliefs, Which he throughout the novel mentions to Lulu, the protagonist Fleur Pillager's daughter. But, by inviting Father Damien to baptize Lulu, Nanapush spouses Christianity: "It was through the custom by which we obliged our friend Father Damien, that of baptism" (p. 61). Here, as the images of two opposing religions, Nanapush and Father Damien seem to work collaboratively, filling the labyrinth between Anishinabe belief and Christianity: "He [Father Damien] carried his host and chalice. I [Nanapush] gave him a dipper from the bucket" (p. 61). Thus, Father Damien performs the baptism, and Nanapush gives the baby the name Lulu Nanapush.

Apparently, Nanapush's intention is not a strict adoption of the white man's religion, but because of colonial demands, as someone who has lived with the white men. This ambivalence is also notice when Lulu was sick, he sollicitates Father Damien who brought some butter which Nanapush uses for his traditional ointment. But he also brought "another thing", mentioning the offreservation doctor, Nanapush said he dislikes: "He also brought along another something I did not want, the offreservation doctor whom I could not trust" (p. 167).

Guided by Christianization and civilization, colonization leads to alienation and acculturation, convincing some Indians, like Pauline Puyat, to abandon their traditional practices and espouse the European Catholicism. But, characters like Nanapush, Margaret and her sons, Fleur Pillager at the head, will, in one way or another, fight to keep what can be seen as their religious practices alive.

### 3. Fighting for the Preservation of the Anishinaabe Spiritual Realities

“Despite the fact that their religious freedoms were rarely protected, native peoples found new ways to defend against white encroachment on their sacred traditions and made their voices heard within traditionally white institutions of power” (<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190221171.013.13>). The protection of culture in *Tracks* has been the last means for Indians to use to maintain their cultural values and maintain a good balance with the European religion. That method has been successful through resilient and resistant attitude adopted by the Indian population, especially through Fleur Pillager, overtly discussed by Erdrich in *Tracks* (1988).

In their article “The Religion Symbolism of Louise Erdrich”, Basley Maddox (2009), declare that: “Religion is a deep force, and people magnetize around the core of a belief system. It is very difficult for one to remain loyal to both” (2009 : 1). This assertion shows clearly that it is impossible to be faithful to a specific religion practice if that religion is overwhelmed by a superior one. Regarding the consequences that can flow from this instability in the religion, some characters like Fleur Pillager, Nanapush have made up their minds to strive and struggle to maintain their customs safely against the industry of modernity led by the colonizers.

Nanapush, in the novel, is painted as the guardian of the Indian culture and civilization. Throughout the novel, he places great importance on his cultural practices and refuses to be acculturated by the religion of the settlers that prevailed in his community. As a matter fact, to show his devotion to maintaining his culture as he has been educated, he spent his time to play the function of teacher. In reality this function of storyteller played by Nanapush was indeed a means to teach his kinship how their ways of transmitting knowledge must not change in favor of the white educational system. By doing so, Nanapush wanted to preserve and pass on the memories of his tribes to the young generation. That is why in most of his conversations with Eli Kashpaw, he used to relate him histories concerning Amerindians’ culture precisely in the domain of hunting. This fact is when explained through this following assertion:

He wanted to be a hunter, though like me, and asked to partner that winter before the sickness. I think like animals, have perfect understanding for where they hide, and in many times I have tracked a deer back... I showed Eli how to hunt... Eli got himself good and lost up near Matchimanito. He was hunting a doe in a light rain, having no luck, until he rounded a sloughs and shot badly, which wasn't unusual. She was wounded to death but not crippled. She might walk all day, which shamed him, so he dabbed a bit of her blood on the barrel of his gun, the charm I taught him, and he followed her trail (p. 40-41)

This illustration indeed comes to put into relation the function that Nanapush occupied in his community as a great teacher of Anishinaabe culture in Erdrich's fictional work *Tracks*. Moreover, the preservation of Indian culture is also demonstrated in *Tracks* through the devotion of Indians to their divinity and their ability to understand the spiritual messages. In fact, Erdrich has succeeded to put in light the great sense of consideration and reverence that Indians offered to their religion. It is in reality this good relationship that the Amerindians had with their gods, has helped them to decode the meaning of messages that were sent to them by the spiritual beings through the representation of animals. That fact is demonstrated through this following lines:

"I am a man, so I don't know exactly what happened when the bear came into the birth house, but they talk among themselves, the women, and sometimes forget I'm listening. So I know that when Fleur saw the bear in the house she

was filled with such fear and power  
that she raised herself on the  
mound of blanket and gave birth”  
(p. 61).

Indeed, the Bear is perceived as being a spiritual being sent by the gods to free Fleur Pillager from her pains and help her give birth safely. Eventually, the preservation of Indians’ culture is underscored in this novel of Erdrich through the self-devotion of Fleur Pillager to maintain the legacy of her forefathers away from the colonial enterprise chaired by the Europeans. Actually, Fleur went to Argus with the purpose of obtaining money and come back to have her allotment lands that have been snatched from her community. “That’s how everyone knew she had come back to stay. It was the money. She paid the annual fee on every pillagers allotment she had inherited, then laid in a store supplies that would last through winter. And it was the money itself, the coins and bills that made more talk” (p. 36). Indeed, these lands were very meaningful to her for the preservation of her tradition. Scullion Anna Grace, in her article “The Decolonial Frontier: Landscape, Maps and Borders in Louis Erdrich’s *Tracks*” (2022) mentions that “In *Tracks*, Erdrich also conveys this challenging of colonial borders through Fleur Pillagers and her important relationship with the land and, especially the water of the reservation” (pp. 75-94).

It is very important to understand that, in this novel, Nanapush and Fleur pillagers are the prominent figures who have fought strongly and jealously to preserve the Anishinaabe tradition, despite the challenges imposed by this modern world. It becomes impossible to strictly cling to old ways in front of this demanding modernity, suggesting a path that favors a balance between Anishinabe beliefs and Christianity.

Maintaining the balance between these opposed forces seem to be very important for the Amerindians people as well as the European. In reality, the Anishinabe people were somewhere compelled or forced to align themselves to maintain a good relationship with the new religion even though they were not happy with that collaboration. This acceptance of being blended with the new doctrine of Christianity has allowed many of them to survive and live peacefully in their different reservations. For instance, Nanapush, the elder of Indians’ community



has willingly accepted to baptize Lulu his granddaughter with wine and water not by a priest but by himself. This act of Nanapush is indeed a symbol that underlines the importance of Christianity for the survival of the Amerindians. "She let the priest pour blessed water on the baby's head and say the words" (p. 61).

Moreover, the cohabitation of Indians people with the Christian religion was so relevant for the Indian American, because this relationship significantly reduced illiteracy among the Indian's community. They learned in white schools how to write and even to read. For instance, Nanapush who is considered a symbolical representation of Indian culture, has had Jesuit education. That's mean, he learned many things about white people and also their ways to chair the world. That is why he was able to stand before the staff of government and refuse to sign the treaty. That idea can be well seen through this assertion that comes from Nanapush "I spoke aloud the words of government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lakes" (p. 2) From this illustration, we come to understand that, the knowledge that Nanapush's knowledge has had a positive effect on the preservation of Amerindian culture.

Finally, as far as the colonizers are concerned, their relationship with Indians has been beneficial for them since they learned from Indians the sense of faithfulness and devotion in their religion. For instance, the priest father Damien was appalled when he noticed that Nanapush refused his European medicinal practices. "Later that day, Father Damien heard of our troubles and brought some butter which I spread on your frostbitten cheeks. He also brought along another something we did not want, the off-reservation doctor" (p. 167). This moment becomes emblematic of a broader negotiation: religious and medical authorities from the colonial side impose their methods, while Indigenous leaders and communities respond with strategic discernment about what to accept and what to resist. On one hand, aid arrives in the form of material support; on the other hand, it signals the imposition of external systems of care and authority that Indigenous communities must navigate. In this sense, the relationship between colonizers and Indigenous peoples is depicted as a multifaceted exchange—one that foregrounds both dependence and sovereignty, both intervention and autonomy, and both assimilationist pressure and cultural perseverance.

## Conclusion

A panoramic view of *Tracks* (1988) permitted to notice that L. Erdrich focuses on a religious dualism which summons the Anishinabe beliefs and the European Christianity on the Anishinabe reservation, confirming Rock's view of such a literary situation: "...double belief or 'dual faith', which is taken by most scholars to mean the preservation of pagan elements within Christian communities" (2021 : 19).

This paper has delved into a complex, threefold issue depicted in Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988): the relationship between Indigenous spirituality and Christian beliefs; the imprint upon religious belief as well as cultural existence by colonial power; and a postcolonial paradigm that reflects on the continuing tension of tradition/modernity. The first part of the paper entitled 'Two Opposed Religious Systems on the Same Land' has identified a complex religious dualism in *Tracks* (1988) as Anishinaabe belief systems both persist alongside, counter, and enmesh with Catholic Christianity. Above all, it is revealed that this dualism is not represented as a static juxtaposition but a dynamic confrontation in which the ritual practices, symbolic and narrative construction disclose a resistance against assimilation or strategic accommodation.

The second section 'Adapting or Rejecting Catholicism' has shown how colonial presence reconfigures religious life, not by obliterating Indigenous spirituality in its entirety but by interfering with and reforming it through education, conversion and institutional authority. Figures like Nanapush and Fleur Pillager negotiate the tensions associated with these pressures by finding modes of living that retain aspects of memory or communal identity while also accommodating some aspects of the foreign faith. The plot, therefore, presents a reconceptualization of religious transformation, not as the obliteration of culture but as one long process in which continuity is preserved and a symbolic world persists because the communities are still there who know it, clinging to their truths even as they argue over them.

The third and last section, 'Fighting for the Preservation of the Anishinaabe Spiritual Realities', highlighted how *Tracks* reflects issues of power, representation and hybridity. It showed how colonial discourse produces Indigenous difference and potentials of rearticulation—where some Indigenous actors take up Christianity strategically to defend land, language, and ritual, for instance. This section insists that the

interdigitation of aboriginal spirituality and Christian encroachment in *Tracks* is most usefully negotiated by keeping in view the intricate pattern of coercion, negotiating and agency-formation rather than opting for either loss or triumph. Given that Indians are a people originally vested in a belief of nature, there is a question worth asking it comes to be important to ask a single question, either to Louise Erdrich or any reader of *Tracks*: is the character Fleur Pillager's loss of power the tangible meaning of the absolute disappearance of what make the Anishinabe authentic Indians?

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