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Cannibalistic Colonial Martyrdom:

Pauline's Windigo-Catholicism in *Tracks*

The colonization of Turtle Island is often told through a capitalist-serving discourse that intentionally neglects the true histories of both the Indigenous and settler groups. This specific omission has shaped the cultural understanding of colonization and has been partly responsible for generating malice towards generalized groups, most notably Indigenous peoples; however, this has also led to a uniquely prejudiced secular interpretation of our colonial history that effectively demonizes modern Catholicism. Despite the role that the Catholic Church has played in colonization, this demonization also seems unproductive in moving forward as a united society. Ojibwe author Louise Erdrich explores these cultural tensions in her novel *Tracks* (1988). Her book uses dual narrators to tell a community of stories, primarily following Fleur Pillager—who represents the persevering Anishinaabe identity—as her community is slowly divided by white settlers. Fleur's story of spiritual development parallels Pauline Puyat's experience of converting to Catholicism and leaving an Indigenous community. The lack of nuance in contemporary discourse about Catholicism and Indigeneity can be seen in the story's development of the Catholic church as being viewed differently by the two characters. Erdrich's use of metaphor and allusion surrounding Pauline's character arc reveals a deeper story. In this essay, I will argue that, while Pauline aims to literally and figuratively embody a colonially weaponized Catholicism, this aim is better understood through the teachings of the Windigo.

Windigo-Catholicism can be defined as the intersection of Ojibwe and Scriptural teachings around unbalanced desire, in which the capitalist-colonial injustice is the result of the Windigo spirit going unchecked. Pauline embodies the Windigo-Catholicism in abandoning her Indigenous heritage and denigrating Fleur, but also in pursuing and self-proclaiming sainthood. When Pauline converts to Catholicism—denouncing her Anishinaabe heritage—and then seeks sainthood by attempting to emulate the lives of St. Paul and Christ she demonstrates the warnings of the windigo about insatiable desire. Ultimately, the relationship between Pauline and Fleur illustrates a larger allegory about the binary struggle between prosecutor and resistor of colonialism, but it also complicates what is so often portrayed as a simple cultural antagonism.

The Ojibwe spiritual entities of Windigo—the cannibal giant—and Misshepechu—the underwater lion—embody teachings against imbalanced desire—teachings also present in Catholicism (Erdrich 11). Within cultural Ojibwe storytelling, the consequences of succumbing to desire are communicated through stories that feature effigial characters that represent negative examples of how to live one's life, particularly how the obsessive pursuit of desire denigrates the humanity of the perpetrator. These beings are described as spiritual entities that possess metaphysical powers. The figure of the windigo in particular embodies unhealthy desire evolving from absence, and of pursuant excess leading to a deprivation of goodness; the inability to be satiated leads to a never-ending cycle of lacking what is needed to survive.<sup>1</sup> Ojibwe knowledge keeper Basil Johnston describes in his book *The Manitous* that “The Weendigo could never requite either its unnatural lust for human flesh or its unnatural appetite” (222). This trait of insatiable, unlawful hunger, represented by the gauntness of the windigo's appearance ultimately

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<sup>1</sup> Johnston's spelling of windigo differs from the spelling more widely used in academic texts as the phonetic interpretation of many indigenous words differ by dialect and transcriber. The capitalization in his quote also differentiates the plurality intended.

demonstrates the necessity (through a lack) of balance. In the Bible, the virtue of moderation or balance is described in a similar way. However, there, desire is personified (as the object of desire can be helpful or not) but not anthropomorphized (as desire does not exist as a character such as the windigo): “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything” (*NIV*, Cor 6:12). Essentially, everything is permissible, yet not everything is beneficial, especially if the desire for one thing is immoderate. The concept of domination is crucial in this verse, as sinful behaviours such as greed, lust, and gluttony are defined as unbalanced, unsustainable, and self-destructive desire.

Another manitou who enforces lessons around balance is Misshepechu. The difference between these manitous is that windigo are beings who suffer from lack of balance, while Misshepechu targets those who are out of balance and, through violent acts, attempts to restore stability. This concept, of Misshepechu as an autonomous entity, and not a subject formed as a result of imbalance, is important to understanding how Misshepechu functions in Pauline’s narrative half of *Tracks*. In Pauline’s racially-biased narration, Misshepechu is an entity that parallels the role of the Biblical Satan, as a being who is blamed for evil deeds. Pauline blatantly describes Misshepechu as “a devil [that] sprouts horns, fangs, claws, fins” (Erdrich 11). Beyond this identification of Misshepechu as a “devil,” the serpentine and feline aspects of Misshepechu mirror those of Satan he appears as the Beast from the Sea in The Book of Revelations (*NIV* Rev 12-13). This characterization of Misshepechu as a Satan-like creature enables her to demonize Ojibwe identity. In the novel, Misshepechu is said to target vulnerable women; however, he is also seen to be a conduit of power that Fleur utilizes as she draws on traditional avenues of securing spiritual strength. Consequently, this manitou connection Fleur maintains in *Tracks* becomes something Pauline further damns her for as she unjustly—as both Catholic and Ojibwe

cultures have valid teachings around moderation—claims moral superiority and pursues sanctification.

Pauline's quest for sanctification leads her into becoming a false prophet as her story and her name parallels St. Paul's. Her denunciation of her Anishinaabe community as she pursues sisterhood and her eventual self-martyrdom are indulgent of her desire to assimilate that comes from "the internalized self-hatred of the colonial subject" (Friedman 110). Thus, while Pauline conforms to the white Catholics in the name of the Lord and harbours internally racist notions, she rewrites her cultural story as a perversion of St. Paul's. Paul converted only after persecuting and slaughtering the followers of Christ before and after being blinded and having his sight restored in a miracle (*NIV Acts 26:12*). Just as Paul goes from committing violent acts before having his 'sight' restored, Pauline instead commits acts of violence unjustly in the name of Christ as a distortion of Paul's hagiography. The violence takes the form of both self-mortification and attempting to kill her child in compensation for her perceived original sin of being born half-Ojibwe (Erdrich 131-135). She goes as far as saying she would rather commit the sin of killing her child in the womb than birth a child out of wedlock and be an "outcast" because of it. In both Catholic and Ojibwe teachings there is significance given to suffering—seen in the practice of fasting—however, people are not advised to seek unregulated suffering. Therefore, self-mortification in Pauline's case can be defined as an excessive and religiously unlawful seeking of suffering that no longer is religiously justified per the instructions offered in *Corinthians 6:12*.

Not only does Pauline selfishly mortify herself in mirroring St. Paul, but she also proclaims herself as a Christ figure, all in the name of assimilation. In this perversion and exploitation of the narrative path to sainthood, she demonstrates the power of the Windigo-

Catholicism. For example, Pauline establishes a parallel between Fleur's relationship with Misshepechu and Jesus's connection with the Father. Pauline says that Fleur, "was the one who closed the door or swung it open. Between the people and the gold-eyed creature in the lake ... Fleur was the hinge" (Erdrich 139). In this passage Pauline claims Misshepechu acts through Fleur and considering Pauline's Luciferian characterizing of the water-lynx, she thus declares Fleur an agent of evil. This characterization gives her the power to glorify herself in contrast with Fleur's debauchery, as she goes on to say that she will become the new "hinge" of God (Erdrich 139). To further articulate Pauline's self-glorification, Erdrich choice of the word "hinge" alludes to a parable in this excerpt, which helps Pauline compare herself to Christ. Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved." (*NIV* John 10). Pauline claims that she will be the 'hinge of Christ,' just as Jesus in the parable called himself both the gate and shepherd. To go a step further, when Pauline describes her pursuit of saving souls—in relation to potentially converting the trickster narrator and community knowledge keeper Nanapush—she describes God's kingdom as "my wealth," not the wealth of God (Erdrich 147). This specificity in language blurs the lines between how Pauline perceives herself acting as a vessel for God and *being* God herself. This behaviour concludes in Pauline's climactic scene: as she attempts to be "[like] Christ, who had fasted for forty days and nights in the desert, Pauline plans to fast on Matchimanito and await her final confrontation with Misshepesu" (Hessler 43). Erdrich's use of preestablished metaphor and allusion demonstrates the imbalance inherent in Pauline as she destroys herself in a deluded enactment of the lives of both St. Paul and Christ—an enactment that ultimately shows the strength of the Windigo and establishes her as a vessel of Misshepechu as she invites chaos into the community.

Moreover, as Pauline's attempted auto-hagiography is destroyed she is in the end characterized as a windigo. As Pauline has tried to sanctify herself through supposedly glorifying acts of suffering, her behaviour only further reveals her spiritual imbalance in pursuit of assimilation—which in this context is definitively a violent process, as the objective is to completely remove the original Anishinaabe identity. To achieve this goal she creates distance between herself and the Ojibwe by claiming herself to be saintly while demonizing characters with connection to manitou. This is exemplified in her disdain for Fleur's relation to Misshepechu, saying Fleur "messed with evil" (Erdrich 12). However, Pauline is not immune to the connection to manitou, as her auto-characterization of her appearance is reminiscent of a windigo's emaciated form. She describes herself by saying, "With my clothes gone, I saw all the bones pushing at my flesh" (Erdrich 73). Her gauntness is another result of her self-mortification, which she sees as enacting God's plan for her, but which in reality is the result of the windigo. The windigo is defined through both starvation—although not necessarily through self-infliction—and cannibalism, as it selfishly seeks to satisfy the unsatisfiable. In effect, Pauline's self-starvation in the pursuit of self-martyrdom becomes perhaps a metaphoric cannibalism of her Ojibwe identity. Although her obsessive self-harm is seen in physical ways, it is also seen through her behaviour around lust. Before validating her existence as the "saviour of the Ojibwe," Pauline tries to find connection through reckless pursuit of lust. The symptoms of 'windigoism' are displayed in Pauline as her imbalanced spirit leads her to first sexualize herself to compensate for her low self-worth and eventually self-mortify in her crusade for assimilation, conversion, and transcendence.

By illuminating the relationship between the manitou and biblical entities, Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* demonstrates what I am referring to here as a Windigo-Catholicism. In the

novel, Pauline's selfish quest for sanctification leads her to becoming not an accurate representation of Catholicism but a windigoistic false saviour. As Pauline uses a misguided pursuit of Catholicism as a vessel for her own assimilation, she contradicts both the Catholic and Ojibwe virtues of moderation. Her self-mortifying practices are excessive and the result of the windigo's unsatisfiable desire—a desire that ultimately turns her into a vessel of Misshepechu. Pauline's character, as both a victim and encourager of assimilation, represents the sometimes-complex relationship between Indigenous and colonial forces. Pauline's exploitation of Catholicism to serve her internally racist prerogative can be further applied to the greater framework of Windigo-Catholicism as it serves colonialism. While we might see this perversion and exploitation of the Catholic narrative as the result of the windigo's power, we must also see the windigo at work in the broader colonial project. Colonial ideology often began with or relied on weaponized religion in pursuit of complete domination of peoples and their lands—justifying insatiable desire by claiming it the will of God. Through the complex allegory at the heart of Erdrich's character Pauline, we witness the effects of Windigo-Catholicism not only on her character but also as it contributes to the broader project and psychology of colonialism.

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