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# Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the authors discussed an opportunity to reply to the letters published. Occasionally the Forum contains letters on topics of broad interest written and submitted at the editor's request. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and regrets that it cannot consider any letter of more than one thousand words. Letters should be addressed to PMLA Forum, Modern Language Association, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003-6981.

## Postmodern, Native, and Ancient Histories

To the Editor:

In "History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*" (109 [1994]: 982–94), Nancy J. Peterson begins her defense of Erdrich by considering Leslie Marmon Silko's infamous review of *The Beet Queen*. In this review, Silko criticizes Erdrich for privileging style and language over history and politics. Silko vehemently raises questions about the cultural and political obligations of the Native American writer, asking, Can a Native American writer claim community without also claiming the responsibilities of representation for the community? Silko, whose own work is inseparable from native land and traditions, finds in Erdrich's novel the dangers of postmodernism to tribal communities: postmodernism isolates writers, fragments communities, destroys traditions, and results in apolitical, self-referential writing.

My response to Peterson's article does not directly concern the correctness of Silko's charge—whether, in fact, it is ever possible to evade history through language—nor does it attempt to summarize the Silko-Erdrich debate within Native American literary scholarship. I wish to consider here the ways in which Peterson's article commits itself to a defense of postmodernism rather than to an active discovery of Erdrich as a writer of Chippewa history and culture. Indeed, Peterson's article is so informed by Western history and culture that tribal specificity can be replaced, in this response, with the construct of Native America.

Peterson concludes her argument by finding that within "the postmodern crisis of history" Erdrich creates "the possibility for a new historicity by and for Native Americans to emerge" (991). Throughout her work, Erdrich does reinvent the historical narrative, but Peterson does not allow for the ways in which that reinvention, that "new historicity," is shaped and compelled by native traditions. For instance, Erdrich discovers storytelling and kinship in gossip. The appointed storytellers who traveled from one camp circle to another, with their winter "counts" of tribal history, are replaced in her work by mixed-bloods at kitchen tables. The tradition of storytelling adapts to contemporary Native American life, but it does not lose its original intention: the carrying and keeping of communal history.

Peterson arrives at a defense of Erdrich's "new historicity" by assimilating *Tracks* into Western history and its ways of knowing. The domain of History presides over Peterson's reading; at no point does she allow herself to discover

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native traditions of telling and knowing history. Here the words of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Linda Hutcheon, Hayden White, and other Western scholars define the limits and the possibilities of history. Even Erdrich's "revisionary project" is known by its participation in and renegotiation of Western history (991). Does the Native American writer bring nothing unique to the conception or discussion of history? It is not enough to include native-white encounters in the revision of American history and culture or to question the monolith (the truth) of History. And it is not enough to find resistance and revision within narratives of colonial encounters. If we are truly to decolonize the representation of indigenous peoples and not simply locate them in positions of reaction to Western history, then we must allow ourselves to discover their actual and original contributions to the telling of history.

Peterson's article assumes that Erdrich's need to "find a new way of making history" must take place in the post-modern debate on culture and history (984). The oral tradition is assumed to be the counterhistory of the written narrative and Anishinabe history and culture a defense against the violence of colonial history. The presence and absence of Anishinabe traditions throughout *Tracks* encourages the reader to look for Anishinabe history in the nonoppositional and seemingly indecipherable moments of the text. Certainly, this is Fleur's power and frustration: her historical being is elemental, originating with the earth and inexplicable within any system of knowledge available to the reader.

In this novel, Erdrich does provide the reader with the easy oppositions of native-white encounters. Nanapush and Pauline, the novel's dual narrators, represent the story (native) and anti-story (white) in the struggle for the ownership of tribal history. Even when Nanapush uses "I," he never steps out of communal identification; Pauline, on the other hand, moves progressively into an alienation—from land, mind, body, culture—defined solely by postcontact, post-Christian narratives. In discussing the two narrators, Peterson finds historical revision in Nanapush's stories but evades the madness of Pauline's narration. This evasion allows her to read, with the assistance of Paula Gunn Allen, "gender balance rather than gender oppression" in the competing stories of Nanapush and Pauline (989). Even Pauline's insanity and violence—her visions appear, talk, and walk across stoves, and God himself tells her she is really white—are insufficient to discourage the discovery of balance in works by Native Americans.

I agree with Peterson's attempt to defend Erdrich's *Tracks* against Silko's criticism of *The Beet Queen*. *Tracks* is a devastating critique of conquest and Chris-

tianity, unrelenting in its representation of the violence visited on Native America. However, in her ambition to place Erdrich within a larger intellectual project, Peterson overlooks many opportunities within the novel for a confrontation with History. To read Pauline as Nanapush's complement, she must read violence as assimilation and madness as the conflict of truths; in short, Pauline must become passive, simply a replicate of colonial ideology rather than a horrifying example of self-hate and internal colonization. And in restricting a reading of *Tracks* to the narrations of Nanapush and Pauline, Peterson becomes committed to an oppositional and reactive native history. She argues within History but neglects its object. Nanapush and Pauline have no history to tell without Fleur. As the object of their desire to know the story, Fleur frustrates, and demands more than, historical or cultural truths. She is as easy to possess and know, to categorize or interpret, as the Pillager smile.

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To the Editor:

I admired Nancy J. Peterson's "History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*." Peterson treats the relation between history and fiction adeptly, but I don't follow her treatment of that between history and the past, particularly as she quotes Linda Hutcheon: "To say that the past is only *known* to us through textual traces is not . . . the same as saying that the past is only textual, as . . . some forms of poststructuralism seem . . . to assert. This ontological reduction is not the point of postmodernism. . . ." Peterson, I take it, thinks that Derrida invites an extreme view with his statement "there is nothing beyond the text" and that Hutcheon rightly cautions us against it (983). As Peterson says, "To participate in the 'ontological reduction' that Hutcheon speaks of is to question or even to deny that the Holocaust occurred—or the massacre at Wounded Knee or slavery or the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and so on. [It is also] to inflict further violence on the victims and survivors." And exculpate the guilty, I might add.

Hutcheon, and I think Derrida too, reiterate Augustine: "When we describe the past, it is not the reality of it we are drawing out of our memories, *but only words based on impressions of moments that no longer exist*. . . . [For example,] my own childhood no longer exists, but when I recall those days and describe them, I imagine them in the present because their impressions remain in my memory" (*Confessions* 11.18; my trans.; my emphasis).

the love of the same man, but, in fact, they end up allies. Likewise, in *The Bingo Palace* Lipscha and Lyman take opposite sides on several personal and tribal issues, but they finish on the same side in thinking about the future of the tribe. The extraordinary power of Erdrich's work, for me, lies in her ability to move beyond what might be seen as firmly entrenched oppositions between traditional and contemporary perspectives, between full-blood and mixed-blood Indians.

Although in *Tracks* it is tempting to see Pauline and Nanapush as opposites, both their narratives are necessary accounts of history—Pauline's vision of the razing of Fleur's land and of assimilationist schools actually happens, and Nanapush's vision of an unquenchable Anishinabe spirit and resistance is also true. And while I agree with Bell that Pauline is mad by the end of the novel (as I discuss in the essay), we cannot therefore simply dismiss her point of view. For one thing, she feels Fleur's power more impressively than perhaps any other character; it is in part through Pauline's longing to be near Fleur that readers begin to grasp Fleur's power, mystery, and significance.

Bell also criticizes my article for being too attentive to Western history and culture. The central conflict of *Tracks* involves the crucial moment when Western institutions and policies threatened to decimate the Anishinabeg (and other native peoples), so the novel invites an interrogation of certain aspects of Western colonialism. Moreover, the novel dramatizes that there can be no return to a pure precontact oral consciousness. Thus, *Tracks* calls for a "both-and" vision encompassing native ways of storytelling and Euro-American kinds of history writing. My essay gives more attention to the latter because of the problems surrounding history and historiography today—problems that affect not only Euro-Americans but Native Americans and other marginalized peoples as well. Erdrich creates historical fiction in a period when postmodern and poststructuralist theories have been used to characterize (and discredit) history as "mere" fiction; this theoretical move would seem to deny the efficacy of writing accounts that could challenge popular (mis)conceptions of (Native) American history. The crucial issue for contemporary writers like Erdrich—and Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, and others—is how to set the historical record straight in the postmodern cultural climate, where stories of genocide, slavery, and racism are apt to be dismissed as politically correct liberal propaganda. And a particularly insidious skepticism has arisen in this situation: we now have radical historical revisionists who argue, for instance, that the Holocaust never happened, saying that there is not sufficient documentary evidence to support the historical claims about

it. As Thomas C. Greene demonstrates, the epistemological problem of knowing the past has been scrutinized for a long time, but today epistemological skepticism has spilled over to ontological suspicion as well.

History is in crisis (I am writing this response in the aftermath of the controversy over the *Enola Gay* exhibit, to cite just one contemporary incident), and authors like Erdrich who write historical novels do so in the context of tremendous theoretical and political turmoil. My essay on *Tracks* tries to show the stakes of such a significant cultural and historical intervention.

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### Contemporary Postcolonial Discourse

To the Editor:

Rosemary Jolly's timely article, "Rehearsals of Liberation: Contemporary Postcolonial Discourse and the New South Africa" (110 [1995]: 17–29), betrays an ambivalence one can detect in Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and other postcolonial theorists. Their rejection of discourses that feed on "positive/negative" stereotypes such as insider/outsider, colonized/colonizer, occidental/oriental, and so on, makes sense for the postapartheid and postcolonial parts of the world. These critics seem to prefer a fluid discourse beyond political identities, consisting, in Bhabha's words, of "modes of differentiation, realized as multiple, crosscutting determinations, polymorphous and perverse, always demanding a specific and strategic calculation of their effects" ("The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al., 72). Nevertheless, these writers do not claim that stereotyped sociopolitical identities are not part of the reality. Bhabha argues that "the stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation" (80). Jolly too wants a critique of the stereotypes "[e]ven if," she quotes Albie Sachs with a nod, "the oppressor is there, physically is there, and is trying to penetrate our minds and to push us, and even to tell us how we should win our freedom" (26). Political resistance without self-exploration could be as misleading as a denial of political identities: resistance is difficult without the identities, and, as Jolly and Bhabha implicitly acknowledge, oppression thrives in the world.