

Reception: texts, readers, audiences, history

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Kenneth M. Roemer, "They Talk, Who Listens: Audience in American Indian Literatures--The Erdrich Example"

Chapter 12 of Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001) may be the only novel chapter ever entitled "The Audience," and Erdrich gives this audience a twist, or rather many twists. Father Damien, who is actually a woman, is rediscovering her ability to play the piano. She performs in a tiny church built on a huge rock. Despite the skill and passion of her playing, for a while the only appreciative audience inspired to attend her performances of Debussy, Chopin, and Schubert is a passel of snakes that rise from "their ancient nest" beneath the rock to slither into the church (219).

In the movie *Smoke Signals*, Thomas Builds-A-Fire tells Victor, probably for the hundredth time, the story of how Victor's father bought Thomas the Grand Slam breakfast at Denny's. As usual, Thomas keeps his eyes closed, as if in a trance, as he speaks. But at one point, from behind his huge eyeglasses, he sneaks a one-eyed peak at Victor to gage his audience's response, which is much less enthusiastic than Father Damien's snakes' appreciation (Alexie 53).

These two scenes from fiction and film suggest the primary arguments of this essay: when interpreting American Indian literatures, we, like Thomas, need to peek more often; and when we do, we need to be prepared to see audiences that are quite different from what we might expect, though not quite as strange as Chopin-enraptured

snakes. To be more specific, most of this essay will be a call for critics to pay more attention to explicit and implicit portraits of audiences, particularly as manifested in instances of listening and mis-listening in contemporary Native American fiction. I will especially focus on selected works by Erdrich, notably *Tracks* (1988) and *Last Report*. My second point, emphasized near the conclusion, is that the “ideal” audiences depicted, while not as strange as Father Damien’s snakes, do not necessarily fit typical notions of ideal Indian or non-Indian audiences. In the post-genocide, still partially colonial worlds imagined by Erdrich and other Native authors, sovereignty, endurance, and basic survival often depend upon the development of listening and interpretive skills that must combine and even transcend previous models from Euro-American and Native cultures.

These imaginings by the novelists are certainly important literary contributions to Native and non-Native literary canons. They also address significant historical and social issues. Despite the substantial increase in the Indian population over the past few decades, drastic Native population reduction and fragmentation since early contact are undeniable facts of the past and present. Modern intertribal divisions can cause further problems. As of February 2011, there were 565 federally recognized tribes, hundreds of state recognized tribes, and many groups waiting for recognition (Toensing 9). How well tribal leaders and leaders of national organizations such as the National Congress of American Indians listen to teach other can play a key role in overcoming fragmentation so that this 1-2 % of Americans can speak with a strong and more unified voice that will be heard. And since the present and future of Indians often depends upon how well non-Indians in power at national and local levels listen to them, constructive models of non-Indian listeners are also essential.

I

My call to pay more attention to audience builds upon generations of studies of the importance of audience in oral literatures. The many excellent discussions of oral literatures include analyses of the nature and functions of audience: book- and article-length general studies such as William M. Clements' *Native American Verbal Art* (1996) and Richard Bauman's "Verbal Art as Performance" (1975) and fine studies of specific genres, tribes, and texts--heirs of Franz Boas pioneering work and classics such as Paul Radin's *The Trickster* (1956)--that focus on particular tribal genres or specific performances, such as Larry Evers and Filipe S. Molina's *Yaqui Deer Songs, Maso Bwikam* (1987) and Andrew Wiget's "Telling the Tale: A Performance Analysis of a Hopi Coyote Story" (1987). Raymond J. DeMallie's lengthy introduction to *The Sixth Grandfather* (1984) and Kathleen Sands's *Telling a Good One: The Process of a Native American Collaborative Biography* (2000) examine the importance of the culture and gender of the non-Indian audience-editor. Moreover, studies of oratory take account of the impact of differing audiences (e.g., Clement's *Oratory in Native North America* [2002]).

Because studies of written Native literature have highlighted audience to a lesser degree than have studies of oral literatures or of as-told-through life narratives, there is a need for systematic studies of real readers along the lines of Chris Teuton's on Cherokee readers or my study of readers of utopian literature (Teuton 183-86, 224n1; Roemer 169-224, 233-57). There are, however, important studies of implied and/or ideal audiences and significant debates about real audiences. Probably the most significant debate attempts to define the appropriate audience for a written literature. In a taped interview

with Kay Bonnetti, James Welch claimed that he initially conceived of *Winter in the Blood* (1974) as a hijacking affair: white Easterners would be captured and taken on a tour of Montana reservations and small towns. But in that same interview he also emphasized that he is most pleased when he hears that his Indian readers believed that he “got it right” (Welch, “Interview”). In *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction* (1995) James Ruppert argues convincingly that the best Native fiction can invite Indian and non-Indian readers to reevaluate their worldviews. Countering Ruppert and other authors who see the benefits of large diversified audiences, scholars and fiction writers such as Jack Forbes, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, and Craig Womack argue forcefully for Indian readers as the ideal primary audience: specifically Indian readers who can understand and benefit most from the works and can resist novels that conform to Euro-American literary conventions that do not represent Native worldviews.¹ Although working with a small sample, Christopher Teuton’s survey of Cherokee readers offers evidence for this preference. Teuton discovered that these readers preferred Robert Conley’s fictional histories of the Cherokee rather than complex contemporary novels by Momaday, Welch, Silko, and Erdrich (185-86).

Also relevant are the implied reader studies that typically concentrate on works clearly derived from oral traditions: for example, Robert L. Berner’s emphasis on active readers of Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), Catherine Rainwater’s view of marginalized readers in Erdrich’s fiction (“Reading”), and several examinations of implied readers of Silko’s *Storyteller* (1981), especially Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez’s detailed construction of “listener-readers,” a concept suggested by Silko in “Language and Literature from A Pueblo Indian Perspective” (Brill de Ramirez 333-34, Silko 57).

We certainly need more of these types of audience examinations, but what I am calling for in particular is a different type of audience interpretation, one that combines elements of real reader and implied reader analyses with character studies and imagines authors creating specific characters that represent powerful examples of good and bad listening, examples that imply iconoclastic and prescriptive messages about Indians listening to Indians and non-Indians listening to Indians. These studies can, of course, focus on genres other than fiction. Drama and film certainly offer possibilities, but unlike fiction, the number and nature of listeners portrayed are limited by production costs and other variables that do not constrain novelists.

Only the imaginations and perceptions of novelists and critics limit the types of character-audience studies of novels by Native Americans. Obvious examples in the early fiction include how Indian and non-Indian characters listen to protagonists unsure of their identities in white and Indian worlds, beginning with S. Alice Callahan's Wynema Harjo and extending through Mourning Dove's Cogewea, Milton Oskison's Henry Odell, John Joseph Mathews's Challenger Windzer, and D'Arcy McNickle's Archilde Leon, the protagonist from one of the most respected pre-Native American Renaissance novels, *The Surrounded* (1936).

During that Renaissance, which began in 1968 with Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, one striking characteristic of several of the best-known protagonists is that they are notoriously bad listeners. Because he is so silent, it is hard to judge what registers in Abel's mind in *House Made of Dawn*. But his actions and thoughts revealed by the omniscient narrator and by Ben Benally suggest that Abel blocks out or holds at bay many of the words his grandfather, Tosamah, Milly, and Benally offer. Finally, the words

of his dying grandfather seem to sink deep enough to motivate him to ritually care for his grandfather after he dies, contact the local priest, and join a traditional dawn run. Still silent, weak, and psychologically vulnerable he holds on to “the words of a song” retained from a Navajo Nightway prayer Benally spoke to him and from his grandfather’s words, heard as a child, that placed him in the world of Jemez Pueblo mesas and dawn risings (191). Similarly it is not until James’s Welch’s nameless protagonist listens to old man Yellow Calf (also his grandfather) and Silko’s Tayo listens to Betone that, as adults, they become better listeners.²

What are the implications of all this poor listening? What historical, social, tribal, and family forces set up defenses against listening? What resources within and outside of traditional tribal cultures help Abel, Welch’s nameless narrator, and Tayo to become better listeners? Similar questions could be asked of more recent characters, for instance Angel as she listens to her grandmother, great grandmother, and great-great grandmother in Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms* (1995) and Lena Coulter as she listens to the apparition of Ezol Day in LeAnne Howe’s *Miko Kings* (2007). And then there are the implications related to characters who never learn to listen, such as the young white priest, Paul, in David Treuer’s *Little* (1995).

II

No contemporary American Indian novelist offers more possibilities for this type of audience study than Louise Erdrich. Like Gerald Vizenor, Diane Glancy, and Robert J. Conley, she is prolific. Not counting the co-authored *Crown of Columbus* (1991),³ she has written twelve novels and a substantial body of children’s fiction, poetry, and non-fiction. Even before the publication of *Plague of Doves* (2008) and *Shadow Tag* (2010),

Peter G. Beidler and Gay Barton, in their revised *Reader's Guide to the Novels of Louise Erdrich* (2006), had given up on exact character counts. They identify “many hundreds” in their dictionary of important characters and mention “several hundred more” in their section on miscellaneous minor characters (69). Adding to this number the characters in the two more recent novels (*Plague* alone has more than fifty important and miscellaneous characters) and the characters in her young adult novels (for example, *The Game of Silence* [2005] is especially relevant because of particularly good [Omakayas] and particularly bad [Two Strike] listeners) makes the count staggering. Because of the grand historical sweep of Erdrich's North Dakota Saga, many major characters listen and are listened to during different stages of their lives. One of the most striking examples is Pauline Puyat, who becomes Sister Leopolda. In a series of novels we witness her development from childhood through her sudden death at 108 as a “transfixed” audience “overcome with surpassing peace,” as she watches what she believes is an enlivened statue of the Virgin (*Tales* 53). Another powerful example is Agnes DeWitt-Sister Cecelia-Father Damien, whom we witness briefly in *Tracks* and from late adolescence through and past her hundredth birthday primarily in *Last Report*.

In one sense what I am calling for has already been done. Many analyses of Erdrich's novels have addressed explicitly or indirectly how particular audiences within her novels respond to words and events, especially when there are differing perceptions: for example, in *The Beet Queen* (1986) the various interpretations by townspeople, nuns, Celestine, and Mary Adare of the image created when Mary slides her way into schoolyard and local history with a face-first collision with a sheet of ice (e.g., *Rainwater*, “Reading” 413) or when Jack Mauser's four ex-wives are car-bound in a blizzard and

forced to listen to each others' different accounts of their marriages in *Tales of Burning Love* (1996). What I would like to see is a more focused emphasis on the psychological, cultural, and social implications of listening in Erdrich's fiction. The remainder of this article offers two examples of this approach. One explores the tragedies of bad listening and the absence of audience in *Tracks*, a novel that focuses on a short but crucial period (1912 – 1924) in Erdrich's North Dakota Saga when tuberculosis and influenza took the lives of many Ojibwe and logging companies hungered after family allotment lands. The other example examines the development of acute listening skills in *Last Report*, Erdrich's "favorite" of her novels, which presents her "favorite" character, Father Damien,⁴ whose life spans the twentieth century, most of which she spends ministering to North Dakota Ojibwe (Anishinaabe) as a man, a Catholic priest. Father Damien is almost impossible to place using conventional concepts of Indian and non-Indian listeners, but s(he) defines a hopeful model listener for contemporary Native American experience.

III

Critics commonly have noted the differences between the two first-person narrators, Nanapush and Pauline, in *Tracks* (e.g., Horne; Peterson; Rainwater, "Erdrich's Storied Universe"). Old Nanapush, the amazing, reoccurring trickster-healer in Erdrich's fiction, has a clearly defined audience: the adolescent Lulu Nanapush, who, though not biologically, is, by name and in some ways by spirit, his daughter/granddaughter. He also has clearly defined motives--to help Lulu to understand and stop hating her mother Fleur and to warn her against marrying a no good Morrissey--and a clear delight in storytelling. In the short run, however, he fails. Lulu is a poor listener: she taps "her fingers on her uncovered knees, shuffle[s] and twist[s] and ma[kes] faces out the window" (178). At one

point she even covers her “ears” (218). And, as readers of *Love Medicine*, *Bingo Palace*, and *Last Report* know, she does marry a Morrissey and still feels some hostility towards her mother. But, as is the case with Tayo’s Uncle Josiah’s and Abel’s grandfather’s stories, Nanapush’s stories must have had an impact. As readers of Erdrich’s other novels know, Lulu does not stay attached to the Morrissey (or any other man) for long, and, in both editions of *Love Medicine* (1984, 1993) and in *Bingo Palace*, she becomes a powerful storyteller and healer and an advocate of traditional Ojibwe culture and of political causes, especially sovereignty, that would protect her mother’s allotment land.

We could label Lulu a latent listener. She changes from being a resistant and inattentive listener to Nanapush into someone who acts out much of his message later in her life. Pauline, on the other hand, especially in *Tracks*, remains a bad listener. To be more exact, she is a coldly strategic listener--a highly selective, opportunistic, and defensive listener. She pays attention to information that might help her to achieve personal goals and blocks out what threatens those goals or contradicts her worldview. For example, she listens intensely to the nuns' “idle talk” about Fleur murdering a Morrissey (204). She should have silenced the talk by sincerely and humbly confessing her guilt (she was the murderer), but she does not. She knows that the nuns’ gossip will deflect attention away from her, so she listens eagerly and remains silent. Since she wants to be a nun and eventually a saint, being labeled a murderer would certainly disrupt those goals. Her silence thereby perverts the good games of silence dramatized in Erdrich’s children’s book *The Game of Silence*, in which keeping quiet can protect one’s family from enemy attacks. On the other hand, she resists listening to Nanapush’s gentle and not so gentle hints (a story full of dripping and flowing water) about the absurd and

dangerous nature of her acts of penance, including permitting herself only two urinations a day. Pauline knows that paying attention to Nanapush's words will jeopardize her chosen means of becoming a nun worthy of sainthood. When Pauline does listen intently and refuses to remain silent, she often uses what she has learned to harm a vulnerable audience. For instance, she learns that a teenager, Sophie Morrissey, desires Fleur's lover, Eli. Because Pauline wants to undermine Fleur's love for Eli, she "filled [Sophi's] head" with lies about Eli Kashpaw's desire for Sophie (81). The lies inspire a sexual encounter between Eli and Sophie; that encounter infuriates Fleur and causes great pain and suffering for Eli and Sophie.

In part, Pauline is a selective, opportunistic, and defensive listener because of an inferiority complex rooted in her inability to imagine an audience that would be willing to listen to her sympathetically. As Nancy Peterson and others have noted, unlike Nanapush's narrative, most of Pauline's narrative seems devoid of audience. Readers of *Love Medicine*, *Tales of Burning Love*, and *Last Report* know that Pauline will be considered by several audiences--some in the community, outside church officials, and certainly by herself--as a candidate for sainthood. In a perverse way, she is a fine candidate. She is ridiculously dedicated to her penances and is associated with miraculous events. To achieve her goals in her pre-nun phase in *Tracks*, she should have clearly defined audiences so that she can perform for the right people who could help her on her way to the convent and sainthood.

Pauline's penchant for penance certainly indicates that she is working on that saintly requirement; in one of her visions Christ even appears with a "pack full of forks, scissors, and sharp needles," all of which he tries out "upon [her] flesh" (193).

Furthermore, like St. Augustine, she has plenty to confess. Her many sins of omission in *Tracks* include leaving several men to die in a butcher-shop deep freeze; abandoning her infant daughter, Marie; not helping Fleur when she is raped; and not helping during Fleur's two painful deliveries, though during one delivery, she does shoot, though probably does not kill, an intruding, drunk bear, which may be a spirit. Her many sins of commission include spreading malicious stories about Fleur, misusing love medicine and lying to Eli and Sophie, acts of illicit (and unfeeling) sex with a no good Morrissey ironically named Napoleon, and strangling that no good with a set of rosary beads. (She is convinced Napoleon was a blend of the Devil and the powerful Ojibwe lake creature, Misshepesu [Micipijiu], who lures women to their death.)⁵

Like St. Augustine and many holy men and women, including Ojibwes, Pauline also has dreams and visions that should be shared with the right audiences. Her dreams include one of her dead mother and sisters buried in tree branches in the old Ojibwe way and dreams of the frozen men calling out her name. Her visions include flying in a "cool blackness" and literally landing in tree branches after Mary Pepewas' death (68), seeing a stature of the Virgin cry real tears, and having a blue-eyed Jesus come down from a cold convent stove in the dark of winter to deliver two important messages. The first is that her sins are forgiven, in particular the sin of leaving her baby, and second, that she was pure white and "chosen to serve" Christ's will by going out "among" the Indians to "*listen*" (137 emphasis added). Her grand vision, after she has failed to help Fleur during her second delivery, takes her on a journey with Fleur that allows her to re-view all those she has seen die and the men she thinks Fleur killed with her powers and to travel past vast herds of Buffalo to the Ojibwe afterlife, where the men who had been locked in the

freezer play a life-and-death card game for Lulu (Fleur wins again) and once again stare accusingly at her.

For someone aspiring to sainthood these credentials suggest obvious Ojibwe and non-Ojibwe audiences. Pauline needs to confess her sins either to a trusted clan or family member or to a priest. In *Tracks* there is little evidence to suggest that she confesses her sins to anyone. (In *Last Report* Sister Leopolda does confess, selectively, to Father Damien, but she also threatens to expose Damien's gender if Damien reveals her sins. That is hardly a saintly confession.) Pauline also fails to share her visions. If she believes the visions are divinely inspired, she, like the great prophets from Indian and non-Indian cultures, needs to share them and use them. For example, Black Elk, whose worldviews encompassed both Lakota and Catholic worldviews, believed that his Great Vision had to be shared with his people and later with all peoples; otherwise the vision could bring harm instead of hope.

In one of Erdrich's most striking episodes, Pauline does create a grand scene that draws the largest audience described in *Tracks*, a scene that could have offered opportunities for listening, for confession, and for preaching her visions to an appropriate audience. In Nanapush's leaky old boat she ventures out on to Lake Machimanito. As nearly the entire cast of *Tracks* assembles on the shore, the parallels to Christ preaching to the crowds from a boat are obvious. The two spiritual elders of the community, Father Damien and Nanapush, venture out to try to save Pauline. Nanapush actually makes it to her. But instead of seeing these two spiritual leaders as rescuers, advisors to be listened to, or as appropriate audiences to whom she could confess her troubled soul, she views them defensively as evil tempters. Echoing Christ, she tells Nanapush, "Get thee behind

me” (199). Furthermore, instead of seeing her audience on the shore as people in need of her visionary messages and people worthy of her attentive listening, she dehumanizes them: “they all stood motionless on the shore now, looking and pointing. They were such small foolish sticks stung together with cloth that in the heat of my sudden hilarity I nearly tumbled over the side” (197).

It is clear that she listened very selectively to her Christ-on-the-stove vision. Part of that vision was to rid the community of “a devil in the land, a shadow in the water, an apparition that filled their sight” (137). Pauline assumes that this devil is the Lake Creature and that she is fulfilling her mission by going out on the lake to confront this devil and destroy it. But according to the vision, she should “not turn her back on Indians.” She should instead “go out among them, be still, and listen” (137). Instead she is so captivated by her self-aggrandizing notions of being the heroic vanquisher of the Devil-Lake Creature and a Christly sufferer in the “desert” rising above temptation that she far from listens. Even though her audience is assembled in front of her, she looks right through it. She sees the people on the shore as distant, dehumanized, distractions and positions herself as a “God . . . beyond hindrance or reach” (198). In her rocking boat she certainly is not (to quote her vision) “among them,” “still” or close enough to “listen” (137). No wonder, on the shore, Fleur turns her back to Pauline. Even though Pauline is facing her audience, she has symbolically violated her own visionary charge to listen and “not to turn her back on Indians” (137).

Reviewers and critics, unsurprisingly, have denigrated Pauline, and even Nanapush calls her a “born liar” (53). It would be easy to write her off as an extreme example of Southern Gothic gone North, a perverse sideshow longing to be center stage,

or even as evil incarnate-- an anti-saint. But to do that would be to turn our backs on the origins of her creation as a selective, opportunistic, and defensive listener and person apparently incapable of addressing or even imagining human audiences. She instead delivers her self-justifications to herself and to her stove-top Christ; what should be dialogue is maniacal monologue. In *Last Report* we get substantial information about her family background. But in *Tracks* we get enough information to glimpse the origins of her listening disabilities, and these glimpses offer significant insights about the effects of colonialism, postcolonialism, and gender stereotyping.

One reason Pauline does not go to a trusted immediate family or clan member with her confessions is that almost all her family members are dead. Early in her narrative she defines her family, the Puyats, as “quiet . . . with little to say” (14); hence she lacked family models of good talkers and listeners. Just as important, she defines her family as “mixed-bloods, skimmers in a clan for which the name was lost” (14). In contrast, Fleur (and Erdrich on her Cree side) is of the bear clan known for healing and fighting (31; Jacobs, “History” 26; McNab 34). Even among her own people Pauline was “different” (38). Nanapush, the man of words, is practically speechless when confronted by Pauline. He calls her “an unknown mixture of ingredients. . . . We never knew what to call her, or where she fit” (39). At an early age she hoped to find a way of fitting by moving away from her family; initially she hoped to learn lace-making from the nuns, but she ended up working in Pete Kozka’s butcher shop. That was spring 1912; by winter she had no family. Consumption swept the reservation. Nanapush tells us that “Pauline was the only trace of those [skimmers] who had died and scattered,” though some “cousins” are mentioned in passing (38, 31). Fleur’s and Nanapush’s families were also decimated. But

Fleur was saved and cared for by Nanapush, and Nanapush, though poor, gave Fleur love, and he certainly was not “quiet . . . with nothing to say” like the Puyats (14). Instead he provided a family model of a strong talker and humane listener.

In Argus, Pauline did experience a few acts of kindness,⁶ but the recurring motif of her existence was invisibility, a logical and tragic consequence of her inability to fit in. She could not be placed, so she was not there. Nanapush joked that they could not overlook her when she opened her mouth “and started to wag her tongue,” but the general response was “to ignore her” (38). She obviously internalized this response. In one of her earliest self-characterizations she says, “I was fifteen, alone, and so poor-looking I was invisible to most customers and to the men in the shop. . . . I blended into the stained brown walls, a skinny big-nosed girl with staring eyes” (15-16). Even the dog of one of the butcher shop workers, Lily, does not notice her. In contrast to Pauline’s “poor-looking,” Fleur was “good-looking” and definitely visible (11). From the men’s point of view, the closest Pauline got to visibility was her existence as Fleur’s “moving shadow that the men never noticed” (22). In one of the few times she does attempt to come out of the shadows and tell, in very plain and clipped words, her Christ-on-a-stove vision to an appropriate audience, her Mother Superior, she is practically ignored. At first the nun “did not answer.” Pauline continues to speak, and the nun “was quiet for a good while.” This “game of silence” certainly does not suggest that the nun is awed by the vision, nor does her eventual response: they’ll have to burn “a few extra sticks” to warm the stove Christ sits on. Pauline interprets the silences and the brief response as a form of rebuke, assuming that the mother Superior judged her vision-telling as an “impudence” (138).

This selective overview of forces shaping Pauline in *Tracks*--many aspects of which will be familiar to Erdrich readers--is certainly not intended as a justification of or excuse for her acts of cruelty. Instead, my observations reinforce past Erdrich scholarship that emphasizes the complexity of her major characters, whom Erdrich inevitably humanizes and complicates. I also want to reinforce interpretations that stress Erdrich's ability to dramatize powerful historical and social forces that live on in community, family, and personal experiences (e.g., Peterson). Obviously the interracial mixing and new professions (e.g., skimmers) that came with the 1797 establishment of the Northwest Company of Montreal's trading post (in what was to become North Dakota), Father Anthony Belourt's 1848 establishment of a Catholic mission in that trading post town, and the waves of decimating epidemics of smallpox, tuberculosis, and influenza from 1780 through the early twentieth century all live in Pauline (Jacobs, "Important Dates" 227-28).

Focusing on issues of audience and listening can help us to understand how Erdrich complicates characters and personalizes historical forces. Pauline's selective listening skills and inability to conceive of humanized audiences reflect the internalization of, not only recent events in her adolescent years in Argus, but also generations of powerful forces dramatically shaping the lives of Ojibwe and many other tribes. She is a prime example of "unhomeliness" and "mimicry," to borrow Homi Bhabha's postcolonial terms, at home neither on nor off the reservations or within herself as she tries to be saintly by mimicking Christian martyrs.

She has been invisible so long that she doubts people will listen to her. After all, why listen to nothing? In a perverted reversal of the Golden Rule, she responds by not

listening to others, unless what they say suites her needs, as in the case of rumors about Fleur. Her internalized invisibility reflects tragedies resulting from hundreds of years of forces that block communication between Indians living as close to each other as Pauline and Nanapush on a small reservation and between Indians and whites living worldviews apart.

IV

Tracks presents us with one of the worst examples of listeners in Erdrich's canon. The *Last Report on the Miracles of Little No Horse* presents us with one of the best. Indeed, *Last Report* may be Erdrich's most sustained foray to date into the nature and effects of good and bad audience response. The title, the frames, and the characters are all rich with questions about audience. A "report" about Indians raises the questions of by whom (i.e., who is speaking for Indians) and to whom (i.e., who is the most appropriate audience). "Last" asks if there can ever be a final word on Indians. My guess is that Erdrich's paradoxical answer would be absolutely not but that we must keep retelling the story as if we could accomplish that impossible goal.

The opening frame (1-8), on one level, is a dramatization of that paradox. We are introduced to a centenarian priest who for decades has been writing popes about "unusual events" on "this remote reservation," including "actual confessions" (2-4; as noted earlier in this novel Leopolda does confess and then threatens to reveal Damien's gender if she reveals Leopolda's secrets). Damien chose the pope as her audience because His Holiness was "next door to confiding in God" (4). Like Saul Bellow's letter-writing Herzog, Father Damien gets no response from God or near gods and is granted no audience. But she keeps writing and writing, though she knows that her "last report" may never produce

a response (4). Thus *Last Report* opens with a dramatic example of how non-Indians in power can refuse to listen to Native messages and a dramatic example of refusing to let the lack of response deter further attempts to reach an appropriate audience.

The closing frames (352-61) raise multiple audience questions implied by the events and stories. After her death, Father Damien receives an electronic audience: a FAX from the pope asking her to reassemble her “life’s work,” which would be of great “use to your colleagues” (355). The letters had been ignored and then destroyed by mistake, but copies were preserved. Another FAX arrives expressing the pope’s concern about an author named “Louise Erdrich,” who made private reports public by incorporating into her books confessions made to priests. Finally, the authorial voice, bolstered with a reference to her character Nanapush, reveals that the name for the reservation “Little No Horse” traces back to a diseased Caucasian horse rider (an uninformed Jesuit mapmaker) and powerful rapids that obscured further the English misnomers. Nanapush believes that the language of the Anishinaabe should replace these English corruptions with accurate reports. The last paragraph of the book, which expresses gratitude for people who helped Erdrich, is in English and Nanapush’s native language, which does not exactly privilege but does acknowledge the importance of an Ojibwe reading audience in the last words of Erdrich’s “report.”

Between the novel’s frames the spectrum of listeners in *Last Report* ranges from notoriously poor audiences (government officials, for example, often listen to the wrong tribal members), reformed audiences (after listening to many stories about Sister Leopolda [Pauline] and witnessing Father Damien’s written and verbal reports, Father Jude realizes that any North Dakota saint’s story should be about the latter, not the

former), and excellent listeners (Fleur, Nanapush, and Mary Kashpaw, for instance, who know Father is a woman early on, see the goodness in her, and protect her secret by practicing the good “game of silence”). Any of these would make interesting case studies in audience. But Agnus DeWitt-Sister Cecelia-Father Damien is particularly fascinating as a reformed audience and model listener.

As an audience for people on the reservation for almost 80 years, Father Damien distinguishes herself as a compassionate, activist, syncretic listener. If Pauline represents unhomeliness and mimicry, Father Damien represents a deep and dynamic sense of home and constructive hybridity, manifested in a willingness to develop, to learn, and to change. She starts from a point worse than ignorance. Her Wisconsin youth taught her that Indians “were to be hated and cleared out” (63). Her only other knowledge came from “pictures in a book” (63). Hence, as she enters the reservation for the first time, it is not surprising that her horse-drawn guide, old Kashpaw, “the first Indian she’s ever met” (62), offers viewpoints that seem “strange” to her, especially his desire for priests to “leave us full-bloods” alone (63). Later, she also has great difficulty believing good advice from Fleur, who knows that Nanapush is trying to trick the young priest, by using Father Damien and Christian dictates against polygamy, to get one of Kashpaw’s wives, which is certainly a violation of Kashpaw’s advice about leaving full-bloods alone.

But even from her first moments on the reservation, Father Damien, unlike Father Paul in David Treuer’s *Little* (1995), shows a willingness to listen and learn. She “crams into her brain” all the “polite” Ojibwe words she can, and she continually asks Kashpaw, Nanapush, and other Ojibwe for advice, which she absorbs and, as indicated below, uses to reshape her worldviews. In part this willingness to listen results from her recently

adopted male identity: “she’s always felt too inhibited to closely question men. . . . As a man, she found that Father Damien was free to pursue all questions with frankness and ease” (62). As Dierdre Keenan argues in her excellent analysis of Father Damien, the complexity of his/her gender identity goes far beyond mainstream male-female binaries and is better understood in terms of Native “Two Spirit” concepts. Anguksuar, a Yup’ik activist and artist, emphasizes that Two Spirit is not fixed in the binaries of “genital activity.” Instead it “defines a person’s social role and spiritual gifts (qtd. in Keenan 3). Will Rosco, author of *The Changing Ones* (1998), links these roles and gifts to mediation. It is clear that Father Damien’s eighty years of sincere and frequently successful commitment to mediating Christian and Ojibwe ways demonstrate positive Two Spirit powers (Keenan 9).

Agnes/Cecelia/Father Damien’s complex gender identity and profession change also reflect her survival mentality, which impels her to ask questions and be open to radical change. After suffering a series of traumas, she knows that survival can depend on unexpected acts of kindness, bizarre coincidences, and desperate decisions: She was forced to abandon her strong desire to become a nun; a bank robber held her hostage and gave her a serious head wound, which affected her musical abilities; she lost two lovers (Berndt, her common-law husband, and Chopin); a stranger, possibly Christ, suddenly appeared to save her from a flood; in her post-flood delirium she discovered Father Damien’s robed corpse; and still in a daze she decided to adopt Damien’s identity and his charge, which she knew was to serve a remote reservation.

Another part of her survival mentality is her syncretism. Even before her traumas, she knew she could experience God as a bride of Christ and as a bride of Chopin.

Unfortunately, because her superiors at the convent felt that her passion for the latter undermined her love of the former, they required her to abandon her plan to serve God as a nun. But this early experience in the power of truth coming from apparently radically different voices, combined with the traumas that opened her to accepting radical life changes, helps us to understand why Father Damien is open to listening to many voices, including the Catholic church, Chopin, Berndt, the nuns who watch over her, the people the nuns tell her not to listen to, especially the traditional full-bloods like Nanapush, the piles of great books that surround and at least once tumble down upon her, Father Gregory, who fell in love with her initially while under that pile of books, and even the voices of a demonic dog, strange spirit voices near Nanapush's cabin, and humans considered demented, like Mary Kashpaw, whom she once mistakenly thought killed Napoleon Morrissey. Father Damien knew on a deeper level that Mary was a vicar of Christ.

By the end of her life two of the many manifestations of her syncretism are her imaginings of the afterlife and her death experience. She still thinks in terms of "heaven," but this heaven, she hopes, is beyond "hells gates and pearly gates" and closer to "the heaven of the Ojibwe" (346), which is very different from the guilt-ridden vision of an Ojibwe afterlife imagined in Pauline's vision following Fleur's second delivery. Damien's vision is, however, no easy syncretism. Even during her last hours, she is plagued by the nature of her radical hybridity: "Who was this Agnes, or this Damien, this overlay of leaves and earth?" (347). Furthermore, she is still haunted by her early traumas, "her losses and stuffed desire" and her anger at Berndt's murder (347).

In her moment of death, however, her combined worlds comfort her. Significantly Erdrich does not specify whose big “work-toughened hand grasped hold of hers” and “yank[ed]” her across to the other side (350). Surely the departed hand of Nanapush was part of that yank. But so was Berndt’s and Chopin’s and, I would argue, the still living and tough hands of Mary Kashpaw, which comforted and inspired her, and even the “blunt” fingers of Father Jude, since the written life of father Damien that would be passed on is now in his hands.

Of course, it is not surprising that Father Damien is a syncretistic listener. That is part of her job. For approximately eighty years she has listened to the confessions of practically everyone on the reservation, listened to what they said and what they did not say. Like the best listeners in Erdrich’s *The Game of Silence*, she knows how to listen to silences and to be a good silent listener. Even as a centurion, she is a compassionate and “popular confessor” (5). Some deeply troubled people even “back . . . out of the church” if they see a younger priest preparing to serve confession. They prefer to wait for Father Damien. And Damien thoroughly “enjoyed hearing sins” (5), not because she could use her knowledge to threaten people, as Sister Leopolda does when she learns of Father Damien’s gender, but because she loves to give forgiveness “with a flourish absolving and erasing their wrongs, sending sinners out of the church clean and new,” and she loves to listen so carefully that she can construct “unusual penances that fit the sin” (5). This task is not easy. Each hearing “require[s] all of the tactful knowledge she had developed during the years spent among these people. *His* [i.e., Damien’s] *people*” (5).

Actually, as suggested above, Father Damien drew on experiential knowledge received even before her arrival at Little No Horse. Her survivor’s dynamism and

syncretism grew out of a post-apocalyptic worldview caused by great and disorienting suffering that opened her to radical changes and allowed her to empathize with her flock. I am not arguing that we should equate Father Damien's survivalist worldview shaped by her many life-threatening traumas with what, in different ways, Erdrich and Sidner Larson define as an American Indian post-apocalyptic worldview resulting from centuries of military and disease-borne genocide (Erdrich, "Where I Ought to Be" 23; Larson, *Captured in the Middle*). Nor should we equate Father Damien's gender identity trials with the identity trials of her flock as they tried to adapt over eighty years to the new worlds of allotments, government bureaucracies and injustices, and the invasive economic and cultural powers of the off-reservation world. Her listening skills cannot be reduced to the simple cliché of "it takes one (sufferer) to know one (sufferer)."

But it is obvious that Father Damien is one of the best audiences in Erdrich's canon. She has consummate listening skills, which she uses to heal in private at confession and in homes and to advocate for the Ojibwe in public. She is not afraid to write to government officials, even if there are not, like a pope, next door to God. If we acknowledge that she is a superior audience, then it is logical to assume that Erdrich is implying that deep empathy requires deep experiential parallels. She might not agree with a famous celebrant of suffering, Dostoyevsky's Underground Man, who wonders, "[p]erhaps suffering is just as great a benefit to [humankind] as well being (qtd. in Richter 191)? But it is clear that Father Damien's traumas allowed her to be a listener who could understand, for instance, Marie Lazarre Kashpaw's and Nanapush's grand acts of kindness, as well as the cruelty and self-destructive acts of a Pauline-Sister Leopolda. On a larger scale, Damien's experiences help her to understand the truth of a brutally

realistic allegorical tale that expresses modern Native American tragedy: the murderous and suicidal urges captured in Pauline's rendition of Nanapush's post-apocalyptic story about the last of the frenzied buffalo herds that "lost their minds," "crippled one another," "tried suicide," and even "tried to do away with their young" (*Tracks* 140). This awareness helps her to listen and forgive in a Christly manner "seventy times seven" (Matt. 18. 22).

If we acknowledge that Father Damien is a superior audience for her small reservation and by implication a powerful model of good listening for American Indians and non-Indians, what are we saying? That a cross-dressing, priest-pretending, male-impersonating, one-hundred-year old, white Indian wanna-be should be claiming Ojibwe as "his people" and reporting for them from a remote reservation to popes who do not respond? Is this just a bizarre recreation of the old story of whites speaking for Indians? This might be the case if Father Damien were the only superior spokesperson, but he is not. Nanpush knows the ways of the Ojibwe, and, thanks to his Jesuit education, knows how to use English and government paperwork to advocate for his people. It is also not the same old story because it is a story of transformation. In "Rewriting the Saints Lives," Alison A. Chapman demonstrates convincingly that Pauline represents a formulaic imitation of medieval saints' lives, whereas Father Damien represents a transformational sainthood--a "hijacked hagiography" of "borrowing, reappropriation, and transformation" of many saints' lives, including Agnes, Cecelia, and Damian, which enables her to survive and serve her people (149, 150, 164).

This celebration of transformation is a striking example of Erdrich's consistent refrain/plea--starting on page three of the 1984 edition of *Love Medicine*: "'You got to be

different.” In the outrageously tragic, humane, and funny world created by Erdrich--a world which sometimes surrealistically and sometimes delightfully and frighteningly realistically reflects twentieth- and twenty-first-century American Indian experiences--to survive and even flourish in couples, in families, in communities, and in this case, in listening skills, you might just “got to be different.” Perhaps that difference need not entail becoming the snakes who listen to Father Damien’s Chopin, but the difference must be enough to make the point that, because of the extreme twentieth- and twenty-first century conditions confronting Native Americans and the parallel conditions found beyond reservations and beyond Native populations, it is important to look for sources of listening, forgiveness, and healing that do not fit conventional models. Father Damien is Erdrich’s most striking example of a “different” listener and healer.

Do we need a focus on how characters listen to each other, on audience-response characterizations, to tell us how inhumane Pauline-Sister Leopolda is or how humane Agnes-Father Damien is? Of course not. Reviewers and scholars have reached similar conclusions using other critical avenues. But there are advantages to an audience-oriented approach, especially for interpreting novels that draw upon oral narrative conventions, as Erdrich often does, for example, by naming Nanapush after the Ojibwe trickster Nanabozo. One of these traditions, which is fundamental to the storyteller-audience dynamic, is defined well by Leslie Marmon Silko: “the storytelling always includes the listeners, and, in fact, a great deal of the story is believed to be insider the listener” (57).

Most of all, an emphasis on listening highlights one of the most significant contributions of the best Native American authors: their ability to personalize with great intensity the complex and often unbelievable (from rational and ethical viewpoints)

forces that have shaped modern Indian experiences. If the astounding statistics and events are effectively personalized in the listening and responding actions of engaging characters, then there is a better chance that non-Indian and Indian readers will be moved to reevaluate misconceptions about Indians and the history of Indian-white relations. This reevaluation would represent a step toward fulfilling a book-title proclamation by one of the founding fathers of the Native American Renaissance, Vine Deloria, Jr.: *We Talk, You Listen* (1970).⁷

Notes

¹ See for examples, Cook-Lynn's "American Indian Fiction Writer," Forbes' "Colonialism," and Womack's *Red on Red*.

² During his childhood, the storytelling sessions with Tayo's Uncle Josiah laid a good foundation for Tayo's ability to listen to Betone and later Ts'eh.

³ As is well known, all of Erdrich's novels until the years just preceding Michael Dorris' death in 1997 were co-authored in the sense that, after the completion of her first drafts, Dorris had a strong editorial presence as he and Erdrich worked on final drafts.

⁴ Erdrich expressed her preference for *Last Report* and *Damien* in a question and answer session after her interview for the Arts & Letters Live--The Writers Studio series (Erdrich, "Interview").

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the history and cultural and literary functions of this lake creature, see Brehm, "Metamorphoses." In *Last Report* we discover that the rosary beads Pauline used in the strangulation were connected with barbed wire.

⁶ For example, she is given a job and place to stay at Kozka's Meats in Argus, and one night when Pauline was asleep on the floor after Fleur played cards with the male workers, Fleur "lifted, soothed, and cradled" her, "rocked [her] so quiet" as she placed Pauline in a closet to sleep on a makeshift mattress of ledgers, papers, and files (20).

⁷ Sections of early versions of this article were presented at the first American Reception Study Conference, University of Delaware, 29 Sept. 2005, and at two Native American Literature Symposium meetings: Mt. Pleasant, MI: 7 Apr. 2006, and 8 Mar. 2007. I would like to thank Patrocinio P. Schweickart, Peter Beidler, Connie Jacobs, David T.

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