

# Defining Hybridity: Frantz Fanon and Post-Colonialism in Louise Erdrich's *Shadow Tag*

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay focuses on issues of assimilation, identity, and hybridity as they apply to the Native American characters in Louise Erdrich's *Shadow Tag*. It interprets the stages of colonization, as proposed by Frantz Fanon, within the novel's storyline by focusing on the specific characterization of its three major characters: Irene, Gil, and Riel. These three characters metaphorically represent the players in a colonial system—the colonized subject, the colonizing force, and the generations of hybrids who result from colonization—in order to depict a truth about Native American identity in contemporary America. According to Fanon, the three phases of colonization are assimilation, rejection, and revolution, with the end result being a hybridized people. Gil colonizes Irene, Irene assimilates to Gil's image of her, Irene rejects Gil's influence, and Riel lives on as a hybrid of both of her parents' influences.

**KEYWORDS:** Louise Erdrich, *Shadow Tag*, Native Americans, hybridization, colonization

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## ESSAY

Over the past three decades, Louise Erdrich has established her reputation in the canon of Native American literature. Her body of work, which encompasses poetry, short stories, children's books, and novels, focuses on the evolution and adaptation of Native American identities into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Catherine Rainwater recognizes that "Erdrich's concern with liminality and marginality pervades all levels of her texts. It affects not only characterization but also thematic and structural features" (406), and Karla Sanders argues "*Love Medicine*...uncovers the resulting ambivalence experienced by her characters as they attempt to reconcile their Native American heritage with the expectations of the dominant white culture in the modern and postmodern United States" (1). One of Erdrich's recent novels, *Shadow Tag*, exemplifies the unique writing style, characterization, and thematic tendencies that Rainwater and Sanders describe. Although Erdrich focuses primarily on such issues as alcoholism, manipulation, and abuse, she weaves aspects of Native American life into the characterization of *Shadow Tag*'s three major characters: Irene, Gil, and Riel.

In her essay, "The American Indian Fiction Writers: Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, the Third World, and First Nation Sovereignty," Crow Creek Lakota Sioux academic Elizabeth Cook-Lynn encourages those contributing to Native American discourses to approach Native American novels with the same mentality one would use to analyze a Third World novel: "[T]hemes of invasion and oppression so familiar to colonized peoples throughout the world that are taken up by American Indian writers serve as proof for the argument that major concerns of Third World theorists must be crucial analytical components of anything that might be said about the current literary trends in American Indian voice" (27). Following Cook-Lynn's advice—to approach Native American literature through Third World theory—my analysis of *Shadow Tag* incorporates post-colonial theory as proposed by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, supplemented with Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity in *The Location of Culture*. Fanon asserts that "it is the colonist who fabricated and continues to fabricate the colonized subject" and that "[d]ecolonization is truly the creation of new men" because "[t]he 'thing' colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation" (2). Bhabha describes these "new men" as "the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One . . . nor the Other . . .

. . . but something else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both" (28). Erdrich's characterization of Irene, Gil, and Riel transforms *Shadow Tag* from a novel focusing on an abusive relationship and the effects that abusive relationships have on children into a figurative representation of the relationship between the colonized subject and colonizing force. In doing so, Erdrich recognizes a truth about contemporary Native American identity. The fifteenth-century Native, "pure" in Native tradition, before the influence of European colonization, is not extinct, but exists as a shadow of the past, and the hybridized Native continues to change from American influences. The hybridized Native, like all colonized subjects, is shaped by past traditions, old memories, intercultural influences, and stereotypes.

Frantz Fanon examines the evolution of national cultural identity in three phases. In the first phase, "the colonized intellectual proves he has assimilated the colonizer's culture" (159). In *Shadow Tag*, Irene assimilates to her husband's artistic creativity and allows him to paint depictions of her in any facet of her life, no matter how personal, private, or intimate. Her early assimilation shows her devotion to her husband, her support for his work, and her need for financial stability through the sale of her portraits. The second phase catalyzes resistance: "the colonized writer has his convictions shaken and decides to cast his mind back.... Old childhood memories will surface, old legends be reinterpreted on the basis of a borrowed aesthetic, and a concept of the world discovered under other skies" (159). After years of assimilation, Irene resents Gil and his obsession with commodifying her image. She voices her unhappiness with their marriage and degrades him in her private diary. In doing so, Irene rejects her "colonizer" and attempts to break free from his control.

Fanon describes the third stage as a "combat stage where the colonized writer, after having tried to lose himself among the people, with the people, will rouse the people. Instead of letting the people's lethargy prevail, he turns into a galvanizer of the people. Combat literature, revolutionary literature, national literature emerges"; ultimately, as Fanon further explains, "the colonized intellectual realizes that the existence of a nation is not proved by culture, but in the people's struggle against the forces of occupation" (159). As the reader discovers in the novel's conclusion, Riel is the seemingly omniscient third-person narrator and the novel is her account of her life. The novel is Riel's "combat literature"; she showcases her father's physical abusiveness and highlights her bond

with her mother over their Native American heritage. She realizes that she is a hybrid of both, yet she identifies more closely with her mother.

Paramount to this discussion is the interpretation of Irene, Gil, and Riel as metaphorical representations of the major players in a colonial system. The similarities in Irene's, Gil's, and Riel's characterizations to the colonized subject, colonizing force, and hybridized generation allow for a clear connection to Fanon's phases of colonization. Of the three, the representation of Irene as an original Native American is the most obvious. I describe her as an "original" because she personifies the first generation affected by colonialism. First, her maiden name is America. This name draws a connection to the land of the United States, and therefore to the Native Americans before colonial infiltration. Additionally, Gil admits, "Irene must have loved him very much to have his children" because his native lineage is not recognized and because "native women of whatever blood quantum are extremely discriminating about the men they have their children with . . . because of tribal enrollment issues and government treaty-right benefits" (Erdrich 13). Gil's declaration establishes both Irene's mixed-blood heritage, and that their three children are recognized as Native because of their mother. Whereas he is essentially stripped of his Native American identity, Irene maintains hers and passes it down to the next generation.

By establishing this correlation between Irene and an original Native American, the reader can recognize Gil's "otherness" in relation to Irene's Nativeness. Early on, Gil mentions that his blood is only one-quarter Native American (13). If Gil's blood is only one-quarter Native, then, logically, his blood is three-quarters "other." The same evidence that highlights Irene's identification with Native American culture strips Gil of his: "Irene must have loved him very much to have his children when his tribal roots . . . weren't recognized" (13). Since the Native American community does not consider Gil enough of a Native, the reader cannot recognize Gil as a Native American either. Instead, Gil's European heritage overshadows his Native American lineage, becomes the focus of Gil's identity, and allows for the connection to the colonist archetype.

The colonial metaphor is further extended in the figure of Riel. Riel's representation showcases the modern Native American condition because of her relationship to Irene and Gil. Quite literally, as their daughter, Riel is the product of Irene and Gil. If Irene and Gil

metaphorically represent an original Native American and a colonizing force, Riel represents the product of the relationship between those two groups—the hybridized, modern Native American. Biologically, both Riel and Gil are Native-European hybrids, but the Native community recognizes Riel's tribal ancestry because of the concentration of her Native blood; meanwhile, Gil's European heritage dilutes his Native blood beyond cultural recognition. Therefore, Riel can be viewed as a Native hybrid while Gil cannot. Riel's representation becomes more obvious throughout the novel as she attempts to tap into her "Indianness," and redefine herself as a Native culturally contextualized within an Anglo-American society.

Interpreting these three characters as players in a colonial system provides the reader with the tools to recognize instances throughout the novel that mirror the stages of postcolonial cultural identity development that Fanon suggests. I wish to expand upon Fanon's stages slightly, by adding the initial act of colonization before the colonized subject assimilates in order to trace the trend throughout *Shadow Tag*. This first stage manifests in Gil's exploitation of Irene's being: "Irene America was over a decade his junior and had been the subject of his paintings in all of her incarnations—thin and virginal, a girl, then womanly, pregnant, naked, demurely posed or frankly pornographic. He'd named each portrait after her. America 1. America 2. America 3. America 4 had just sold in six figures" (8). Gil uses Irene as a resource. He paints her in all aspects of her life, even in compromising positions, and sells them for a profit. With these portraits he strips her of her identity and brainwashes the public to see Irene as he sees her, rather than how she sees herself; he literally commodifies her. Gil acquires his wealth through the exploitation of his wife, just as "the colonist derives his validity, i.e., his wealth, from the colonial system" (Fanon 2). This commodification creates a level of codependence between Gil and Irene. Gil depends on Irene as an object to increase his wealth, and Irene depends on Gil's wealth to support her new lifestyle with him. In a sense, he captures Irene and reshapes her in his own vision. He colonizes her.

After the initial stage of colonization, the colonized subject must assimilate to the colonial regime for support. According to Fanon, "In order to assimilate the culture of the oppressor and venture into his fold, the colonized subject has had to pawn some of his own intellectual possessions. For instance, one of the things he has had to assimilate is the way the colonialist bourgeoisie thinks"

(13). As a famous artist, Gil popularizes images of Irene that overshadow the truth of her being, and as images in the foreground, they inevitably influence a culture to view Irene differently from her opinions of herself. However, to maintain her lifestyle, Irene assimilates to Gil's inspirations by allowing "him to paint her on all fours, looking beaten once, another time snarling like a dog and bleeding, menstruating...He'd done a series of landscapes, huge canvases vast with light...in which she appeared raped, dismembered, dying of smallpox in a graphic medical detail" (30). Arguably, these violent depictions of Irene destroy her true identity, yet she allows it because of her dependence on Gil for financial, social, and familial stability. Her identity depends on Gil and his success; her old identity, before Gil's influence, fades further into non-existence with every portrait that he paints. To survive, she assimilates, she adjusts, and she endures.

Fanon proposes that assimilation is only temporary, a tool to cope with the trauma of drastic change and codependence. Eventually, the colonized subject "has his convictions shaken and decides to cast his mind back.... Old childhood memories will surface, old legends be reinterpreted on the basis of a borrowed aesthetic, and a concept of the world discovered under other skies" (159). Irene mounts her resistance with her two diaries, the Red Diary and the Blue Notebook. The reader learns, in an excerpt from the Blue Notebook, "the second diary, what you might call my real diary, is the one I am writing in now" (1), which she keeps in a safety deposit box away from Gil, while her Red Diary lies inconspicuously, yet purposefully, in a desk drawer. Irene knows Gil's desire to control her will prevent him from resisting the temptation of a seemingly private diary. She uses the Red Diary to manipulate him. Just as Gil's depictions of Irene separate her from her sense of self, Irene's Red Diary causes Gil to question his marriage, to question the very woman who validates him. Essentially, the Red Diary is Irene's way of reestablishing herself by destabilizing Gil's security, while the Blue Notebook allows Irene to confess to her manipulations, and at times gloat about them. The very fact that Irene has a secret diary at all is, in itself, an act of resistance. As Irene recognizes Gil's shaken security, she gains more self-confidence and gradually reclaims her identity. The colonized subject challenges the colonial system to regain independence and return to old traditions, but their culture, lifestyle, mentality—their very identity—is permanently influenced by the colonial system.

The resistance results in a decolonized hybrid, and

the literal offspring of decolonized hybrids are further hybridized. They are physical manifestations of the interaction between the colonist and colonized, but redefine themselves, as best they can, in alignment with their Native, rather than transplant, ancestors. Riel, as the offspring of Irene and Gil, is the figurative embodiment of the next-generation hybrid. She resists her father and identifies with her Native heritage:

[S]he became aware of herself as an Indian, an American Indian, a Native person. Many of the events that she remembered were powwows, visits to her grandmother, wakes, moments during ceremonies, times she'd put tobacco on the ground to pray with her mother. Some of these things hadn't happened for years. But she was still an Indian. Her skin was pale, her eyes a muddy hazel, but she was still an Indian, wasn't she? (59)

Riel's epiphany encourages a postcolonial interpretation. Irene, the colonized Native American, resists Gil's control over her. The bond between the colonist and the colonized subject is weakened, providing an opportunity for the next-generation hybrid to continue the resistance—in Riel's case, rejection—and begin redefining the culture's identity. Riel decides to "take away [Gil's] power" and become not "just a Native person, an American Indian, an Ojibwe or a Dakota or a Cree, but a person of example. She would become a girl of depth, strength, cunning, and truth" (62).

Riel aligns herself with her Native ancestry, but understands that she can never be "just Native." Biologically, mentally, subconsciously, Riel is affected by her father but wants to redefine what it means to be of Native descent within a white dominant society. As a child, Riel wants to redefine herself by following some Native traditions, but wanted not to "have to act like an old-time ancestor and could instead ask for high-heeled shoes, a longboard, or maybe a real skateboard, and a helmet not with pink Hawaiian flowers on it, but a black one with a winged skull in a circle of fire" (65). Although this content exudes a level of maturity consistent with Riel's age—that of a twelve-year-old—the essence of the ambition captures Fanon's theory. The decolonized hybrid incorporates fragments of the pre-colonial nation and of the colonial system into their new culture.

By their very nature, Indian reservations in contemporary America represent this type of hybridity. People

living on reservations, regardless of their Native blood concentration, clearly identify with their Native ancestry, but Indian reservations are a product of colonialism and westward expansion. Obviously, reservations are only shadows of the communities that were destroyed during colonialism, but reservations provide a way of adapting to, and maintaining an identity within, contemporary America. The arrangement may not be ideal and colonialism cannot be unwound, but Native American identities reshape themselves “under other skies” and endure.

Irene, Gil, and Riel all struggle with issues of identity, yet Irene and Riel seek to redefine themselves outside of Gil’s shadow. Irene allows her identity to be stolen, reshaped, and commodified to survive, but tries to regain control by resisting her oppressor. The Native community invalidates Gil’s Native ancestry, so he identifies with his European ancestry, exploits his wife, and creates wealth through the commodification of the person in his life who is most directly linked to the Native community. These opposing forces, despite their attempts to escape each other’s influence, find themselves bound together by their marriage, their children, and their co-dependence. Their identities are so intricately woven together that neither can exist without the other. Similarly, colonialism permanently impacts the colonized subject. The colonizer’s identity is altered due to the colonization of new lands and new people, while the colonized’s identity adapts to survive colonialism. They establish a type of symbiotic relationship and depend on each other. When one withdraws, the other dies out, and the survivors rebuild, redefine, and reestablish themselves, forever hybridized by the colonial system.

This phenomenon plays out in the final section of *Shadow Tag*. Gil realizes Irene’s resistance towards his colonization and Riel’s rejection of his influence, so he decides to remove himself from their lives. Gil swims out into the frigid lake water, with no intent of returning: “he’d go as far as he could. A few minutes of swimming should be enough to drop his body temperature to a level from which he could not recover” (243). Although Gil might think his last action will free Irene from his control, in actuality, Gil’s action seals their fates. Irene despises Gil, resents Gil, is abused and exploited by Gil, and yet she depends on him and cannot live without him. It can also be argued that Gil’s suicide is his ultimate manipulation; his action forces Irene’s next action. She “waded into the lake and then threw herself forward . . . By the time she reached our father, he had floundered,

but we saw her clutch his head and turn, dragging him by the hair. Her arm was straight out and she kicked, sidestroking . . . Then she disappeared” (247). Irene leaves her children to follow the person whom she depends upon to her own demise. Fanon mentions that “decolonization is always a violent event” (1), and the parents’ dual suicide exemplifies the most violent event in the novel. Irene and Gil decolonize themselves from each other, they decolonize themselves from their children, and the children, the hybrids, survive.

Following this scene, the narrator reveals herself as Riel, reflecting on the events throughout her life that ultimately make her who she is. As a child, she vows to connect with her Native heritage, to identify with it, and to become a traditional Native in a postmodern society. As an adult, Riel understands the complex state of Native American identity in a postmodern society: “I also found that the old-time Indians are us, still going to sundances, ceremonies, talking in the old language and even using the old skills if we feel like it, not making a big deal” (248–49). By providing Riel with this reflection, Erdrich informs the reader that Native Americanism continues to exist. Hybridity allows contemporary Natives to assimilate aspects of modern society, such as technology, transportation, and education, to supplement a lifestyle that recognizes the past. Traditions are still practiced, languages are still spoken, and old skills are still used, but the culture lives on because of hybridity and an adaptation to dominant social norms.

The final, and arguably most compelling, piece of evidence that connects this novel to Fanon’s theory is the novel’s meta-narrative quality. The novel itself is an example of the “combat literature, revolutionary literature, national literature” (Fanon 159) that emerges from the hybridized nation in order to reestablish a national culture. Throughout the storyline, the novel appears to have a third-person narrator observing the events throughout a family’s life in mostly chronological order. However, the novel concludes with Riel’s disclosure:

And now, as you can see, I have put it all together, both of her diaries. The Red Diary. The Blue Notebook. Her notes on Catlin. My memory charts. I have also filled in certain events and connections. Sometimes, it has helped me to talk to May. Other times, I imagined that I was my mother. Or my father. I have written about them in many ways. . . . So you see, I am the third person in the writing.



I am the one with the gift of omniscience, which is something—I don't know if it's generally known—that children develop once they lose their parents. This is also, of course, my master's thesis. I am a writer in a writing program and here is the place where I thank my mentors. Thank you, parents, you left me with your marriage, my material, the stuff of my life. (251)

*Shadow Tag* tells Irene America's story, through Riel's voice, through Louise Erdrich's pen.

This meta-narrative style infuses *Shadow Tag* with the multivocal quality that Erdrich's body of work is known for and imitates Native American storytelling. In her contribution to the anthology *Native American Writers*, Shelley Reid declares:

Erdrich's novels, in fact, demonstrate how the use of multiple narrators helps alleviate the alienation of individual characters; how stories which are half-told, re-told, and left un-told suggest a common base of knowledge that ties characters together and helps individuals and communities adapt to changing times; and how achronological, non-linear narrative structures recall the security of a web of stories, all tied to one another in a representation of personal stability and cultural survival. (9)

*Shadow Tag* is a novel, a thesis, a diary, and a narrative—a collection of voices synthesized into a single story that captures the struggle, resistance, and endurance of a culture. Irene's diaries exemplify combat literature and by writing them, Irene embodies the colonized intellectual whom Fanon describes. Riel's master's thesis mirrors combat literature and as a student pursuing her M.A., Riel epitomizes the colonized intellectual. *Shadow Tag*, authored by Louise Erdrich, a hybridized Native of Chippewa and German descent, is by its very nature an example of combat literature. As a work of combat literature, *Shadow Tag* depicts the colonial system at work among three characters, and in turn, Erdrich depicts the effects of the colonial system on the Native American identity. The fifteenth-century Native American and the sixteenth-century European colonist no longer exist in the twenty-first century. Instead, the twenty-first century Native American is a hybridized identity, neither one, nor the other, but a product of both.

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