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The complicated web: Mediating cultures in the works of Louise Erdrich

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The complicated web: Mediating cultures in the works of Louise Erdrich

Hafen, P. Jane, Ph.D.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1993

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The Complicated Web: Mediating Cultures
in the Works of Louise Erdrich

by

P. Jane Hafen

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

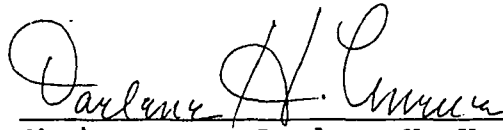
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University of Nevada, Las Vegas
August 1993

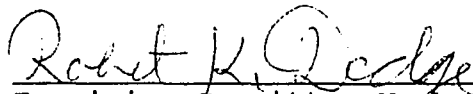
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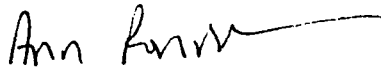
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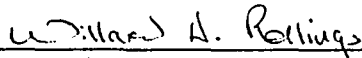
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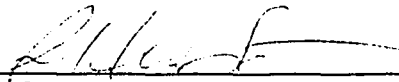
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ABSTRACT

Louise Erdrich is a mixed blood Turtle Mountain Chippewa, educated in the dominant culture. Her volumes of poetry, Jacklight and Baptism of Desire, express a personal and narrative voice that reflects her tribal, European, Catholic, and educational heritage. Her well received novels, co-authored with her husband, Michael Dorris, are poetic in their language. Love Medicine and Tracks abound in myth, irony, humor, and contemporary Chippewa issues. The Beet Queen and The Crown of Columbus, incorporate Euroamerican settings and characters while disclosing Native American characteristics of oral rhetoric and tribal community. The trickster archetype in Erdrich's works incorporates survival humor, moral indicators, and cultural mediation. The conflation of narrative voices, cultural pluralism, indistinguishable genres, and interdisciplinary criticism interweave a complexity that celebrates diversity in a "toleration of paradox" and harmonizes the human community.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| ABSTRACT | iii |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | v |
| CHAPTER 1 Introduction: Louise Erdrich in the Context of Modern Criticism | 1 |
| CHAPTER 2 Words of a Remembered World: Poetry and The Oral Tradition | 22 |
| Personal and Reflective Poems | 26 |
| Poetry of Ritual | 36 |
| Narrative Poetry | 54 |
| CHAPTER 3 Crossing the Bridges: The North Dakota Novels | 76 |
| <u>Tracks</u> | 79 |
| <u>The Beet Queen</u> | 88 |
| <u>Love Medicine</u> | 118 |
| CHAPTER 4 A New World Discovery in <u>The Crown of Columbus</u> | 135 |
| CHAPTER 5 Conclusions: More Than Survival | 152 |
| APPENDIX | 165 |
| Permission to Quote Copyrighted Material | 166 |
| Permission to Quote Copyrighted Material | 167 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 168 |

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Louise Erdrich in the Context of Modern Criticism

The works of Louise Erdrich, both poetic and novelistic, present a Twentieth Century Native American voice. That voice is a complicated amalgam of cultures: German American, Midwestern American, Ivy League, Modern and Post-modern Western Civilization, and Native American Chippewa (Ojibwa, Anishinaabe).¹ For Erdrich, to be a Native American writing in a modern world is to explore cultures with an awareness of history, a heritage of ritual and its language, and a survival of disease, violence, and attempts of dominant cultural assimilation. Definitions of Native Americans,

¹"Native American" is the current and politically correct term used to describe the variety of indigenous nations within the United States and differentiates the nomenclature and navigational error of Columbus. Although "Chippewa," "Ojibwa," "Ojibway," and "Anishinaabe" refer to the same tribal peoples, Erdrich uses "Chippewa," and that designation will be used throughout this study.

tribal affiliations, cultural and social associations, and blood lineage all contribute to identity and individuation in a multi-cultural and complex world.

Louise Erdrich was born in 1954 in Little Falls, North Dakota. Her father is German American and her mother a Turtle Mountain Chippewa, daughter of the former tribal chair, Pat Gournneau. Louise is the oldest of eight children. Erdrich attended public and parochial schools in Wahpeton, North Dakota, where she was homecoming queen (See "Conversions"). Through the encouragement of her mother, she applied to the first co-educational class at Dartmouth, graduating in 1976. Following graduation, Erdrich returned to North Dakota, working in the Poetry in Schools program, publishing, and television. She returned to the East in 1978 to earn a Master's degree in creative writing from Johns Hopkins. She then worked as a newspaper editor for an Indian urban center in Boston.

In 1981 Erdrich became creative writer-in-residence at Dartmouth College. The same year she married Michael Dorris, mixed blood Modoc, professor

and director of the Native American Studies program at Dartmouth. Dorris had adopted three children prior to their marriage, Abel, Sava and Madeline. Three more children, Persia, Pallas, and Aza were born to the couple. The oldest child, victim of fetal alcohol syndrome and subject of Dorris's non-fiction book The Broken Cord (1989), and television docudrama of the same name, has since died.

Erdrich's marriage to Michael Dorris became also a fruitful literary collaboration. Their joint efforts in fiction are well-documented and will be discussed in Chapter 3. Only The Crown of Columbus appears under both names. Despite their close work on the novels and a forthcoming volume of essays, Erdrich has acknowledged that her poetry is exclusively her own (Reno).

Erdrich's individual poems and short stories are widely published in periodicals, and her books include two volumes of poetry, Jacklight (1984) and Baptism of Desire (1989), and four novels: Love Medicine (1984),² The Beet Queen (1986), Tracks (1988), and The Crown of Columbus (1991). A fifth

²Love Medicine will be reissued Fall 1993 with an additional eighty pages.

novel, The Bingo Palace, the fourth novel of the North Dakota clan tetralogy, is forthcoming in December 1993/January 1994 (Dorris, Cedar City). Dorris has published two fictional works, A Yellow Raft in Blue Water (1987), and Morning Girl (1992), a children's novella. A collection of his short stories is forthcoming in the Fall of 1993.

Erdrich has received numerous awards: the American Academy of Poets Prize, the Nelson Algren Short Fiction Award, the National Award for Fiction, the 1985 O. Henry Prize for a chapter from Love Medicine. Love Medicine has been awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Los Angeles Times Book prize, the Sue Kaufman Prize for the Best First Novel, and the Virginia McCormick Scully Prize for the Best Book of 1984 dealing with Indians or Chicanos.

The popularity and critical success of Erdrich's works has invited analytical attention within the currents of contemporary trends. Love Medicine, in particular, has been the subject of a variety of critical interpretations. Marxism or New Historicism, reader response criticism, feminism, anthropological structuralism, post-structuralism,

and postmodernistic methods have all been used in critical studies of Erdrich's works. Sufficient evidence of cultural hegemony, reified and heuristic languages, dialogism, exposition of constructs, and privileged discourse, oral rhetoric as discourse exists in Erdrich's works. However, individually, any of these approaches is teleological, limiting Erdrich's work to a singular understanding, often to the exclusion of additional significant interpretations and issues. Elaine Jahner notes the problems with literary criticism:

We can use texts to show how culture imposes order upon lived experience and, indeed, such demonstration has been the purpose of considerable scholarly writing in all disciplines affected by the major anthropological models of our century. The problem with much of this scholarship is that it often declares that attention to the individual is theoretically insignificant. . . . The most helpful research is that which presents and criticizes the notion of the subject as a linguistic and hermeneutic category, thus permitting a consideration of the subject that subsumes other crucial categories--such as race--keeping all analysis firmly based within the acknowledged (and therefore explicit) critical assumptions of a given social and historical configuration. American Indian writers and critics have consistently done just this. (184-5)

Fundamental critical questions address the human experience, how the author and the reader enter the fictive world and humanistically respond to the textual journey of language. Because the experience of the modern or postmodern Native American is comprised of pluralistic experiences, a hermeneutic procedure best illuminates this textual journey in a truly multicultural universe.

In the nihilistic Marxist universe where all constructs and discourses are political, ontological comprehensions of tribal communities are excluded, thus denying mythic realities of the Native American experience. Vine Deloria, Jr., rejects Marxism on these political and philosophical grounds:

From the perspective of American Indians, I would argue, Marxism offers yet another group of cowboys riding around the same old rock. It is Western religion dressed in the economistic clothing, and shabby clothing it is. It accepts uncritically and ahistorically the worldview generated by some ancient Western trauma that our species is alienated from nature and offers but another version of Messianism as a solution to this artificial national concern and application, poses as much threat as ever did the Christian missionaries. In education theory it provides outmoded and inapplicable socialization with abstract and useless, if not invalid, knowledge; at least

generalizations which have little
relevance to tribal situation. (135-136)

Additionally, as Deloria suggests, Marxist theory fails to address fundamental Native American issues of land rights and communal tribal concerns. As a literary theory, it fails with Erdrich on similar issues: the ontological nature of place and the social structuring of tribal communalism where the individual is paradoxically identified and absorbed in social community.

Ironically, while Marxism has solicited reassessments of worldviews through appraisal of historical constructs, thus inviting "marginal" literatures into a redefined canon, as a critical approach it nevertheless closes interpretation of literary texts in its assumption that all discourse is political. Of course many Native American issues are political; however, Erdrich, herself, has stated that she does not consider her work political but a search for voice and identity (Reno). So while political and economic issues are apparent, particularly in Tracks and Love Medicine, to analyze Erdrich's works solely from a sociological and political basis would fail to consider vital human

issues of voice and survival. Furthermore, to be caught up in the metalanguage of such a critical approach would betray the clarity of Erdrich's own language and narrative strategies (Schultz).

Reader response criticism is another critical theory that, while useful, is limiting in addressing Erdrich's work. The application functions best with fiction, but ignores the personal and ontological expressions of the author, particularly when applied to poetry. Relying solely on the interpretations of the reader throws literature into a realm of relativism. This slippery epistemology is especially dangerous to cultures who depend on the power of language, with the tradition of oralization of ritual, for survival.

Pauline Groetz Woodward in her dissertation, New Tribal Forms: Community in Louise Erdrich's Fiction, suggests that the theoretical approach of reader response is required to comprehend the multiple narrator and sectional structure of Erdrich's novels:

The changing voices in Love Medicine demand that the reader be an active participant in the text's meaning: the reader must synthesize the various stories that are told and must constantly make

corrections and adjust meaning. The reader uses imagination as a means of closing the gap between the inner life of the novel and the outer reality of modern tribal people, and is assisted in the process by the many narrators who invite participation in the making of meaning.
(7)

Woodward's argument operates well for the informed reader of Erdrich's fictional works. The reader can and must bridge narrative gaps and create a sense of community and continuity, especially in Love Medicine. This theory cannot, however, explain how the reader may enter the modern Chippewa universe without an explicit cataloging of material culture and codes by Erdrich.

Additionally, an uninformed, insensitive, or culturally entrenched reader might encode the text with errors, such as the reader who wrote to Erdrich, asking why the author advocated drunken driving in the "Crown of Thorns" chapter of Love Medicine (Reno). Reader response approach is particularly hazardous in areas of race and gender where the text can be misread or text-proofed to reinforce misperceptions and stereotypes.

Feminism, as a critical approach to Erdrich, likewise is attractive but limiting. The strength

of Erdrich's female characters, Fleur, Pauline (Sister Leopolda), Mary Adare, Dot, Marie Lazarre, and Lulu Lamartine, along with Erdrich's own success, invite gender analysis. The feminine community of The Beet Queen and Love Medicine is obvious (see Barnett, DePriest, Sands, Tsosie, and Woodward). The Beet Queen, with the predominance of Euroamerican characters, is most notable for the absence of strong male characters, a void that raises issues of marginality. The disempowered status of Native American women, however, is mistaken for an extension of the oppression of sexism. The appropriation of race to justify the subjection of all women ignores the labyrinthine factors of cultural practices and economic circumstances. As Elizabeth V. Spellman notes:

The real problem [with feminism] has been how feminist theory has confused the condition of one group of women with the condition of all. (4)

Feminist issues for Native American women who have a heritage of matriarchy where "traditional tribal lifestyles are more often gynocratic than not, and they are never patriarchal" (Allen 2), are significantly more complex than mainstream issues,

especially when mediating with the dominant culture. To assume that feminism theory subsumes race because of female commonality is an extension of colonialism.

Further, to focus exclusively on female characters ignores the strength of male characters and the union that must occur between the sexes in order to merely exist, a crucial element of survival literature. The female role in Native American cultures is complex, particularly in the intricacy of patrilineal societal systems, such as the Turtle Mountain Chippewa, with which Erdrich has matrilineal affiliation. Shechner comments on her uniqueness:

Erdrich's feminism, then, and her Native-Americanism go hand in hand, because what she shows us is the dynamism of the matriarch, which, though it is a captive nation, is a society that can take care of its own. Whatever it is the men do and whatever power they may have, it is the women who define the moral life of the tribe and are the maintainers of the social order, which, though disorderly by white middle class standards, has its own strict logic. (48)

Political feminist issues in Erdrich's prose works are obfuscated by co-authorship with Michael Dorris. Certain examples of Erdrich's poetry have a

more distinctive feminine voice than the co-authored fiction, while other poems have no gender identification or a louder Chippewa voice. In The Crown of Columbus, the stage is shared equally by Vivian Twostar and Roger Williams. Their counter-balance also suggests matters of parity in multiculturalism of Native American and Euroamerican ancestries. Perhaps this idealism where both sexes and both cultures function holistically explains, partly, why Erdrich is neglected by prominent political feminist Native American critic Paula Gunn Allen.

Native American literature by female authors entices an alignment of sexism and racism as a political critical literary method of analysis, creating an exotic "otherness." In Roy Harvey Pearce's classic study Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind, the hostile, extrinsic images of the American Indian verify mainstream culture and values. The inverse of the savage image is a noble, sentimental romanticism akin to colonialism and is still prevalent in popular culture. However, the theories of Levinas and his ideas of "otherness" which

acknowledge an exterior existence apart from self in individualistic relationships are probably misappropriated for the political causes of race and gender. The classification of "other" only functions when ownership and sentimentality are abandoned in favor of recognizing the external existence of any entity on his or her own terms, regardless of race or gender.

When "otherness" is romanticized it is not fully comprehended or truly and distinctly "other." The consequential criticism is an anthropological structuring of unique cultural characteristics and practices that present an "other" worldview, while perpetuating mainstream validation. Ironically, this infatuation with "otherness" may contribute to Erdrich's popularity, as her narratives are culturally distinct while presented in the canonical novelistic medium, and continue to appeal to the dualistic noble savagery of Americanism.

Anthropological structuralism, informed by the works of Levi-Strauss, has been widely used to analyze Erdrich's works. Cultural phenomena and archetypal characters have been used as a key to understanding historical connections with fiction

and the Chippewa traditions (see Catt, Schultz, Smith, and Stripes). The general limitations of structuralism are similar to those found in anthropological criticism of Erdrich; there is no accounting for time and cultural transformations. Once identified, a cultural manifestation remains locked in an absolute past. The real experience of being Native American and living in the actual world of here and now requires change, adjustments, and reinterpretations of histories, all of which are precisely what Erdrich has recreated. Her awareness of cultural dynamics has invited criticism (Stripes and Silko) from those who would prefer Native Americans to remain forever savage or forever noble, or both.

The trickster is one anthropological type that transforms, is not bound by history and tradition, and functions as a cultural mediator in Erdrich's work. Gerald Vizenor has included the prominence of trickster in these characteristics of Native American fiction:

There are four postmodern conditions in the critical responses to Native American Indian literatures: the first is heard in aural performances; the second is seen in translations; the third pose is a

trickster signature, an uncertain humor that denies translations and tribal representations; and the last postmodern condition is narrative chance in the novel. (ix)

The orality of Native American fiction is fundamental. Although Erdrich inscribes in a modern medium, her language is aware of its oral historicity, a sacred emphasis on speaking and storytelling. As Paula Gunn Allen observes, this awareness reveals self-identity through tribal practice and operates as a medium of cultural adaptation:

The oral tradition is more than a record of a people's culture. It is the creative source of their collective and individual selves. . . . The oral tradition is a living body. It is in continuous flux, which enable it to accommodate itself to the real circumstances of a people's lives. (224)

Likewise, Louis Owens notes the significance of the tradition to modern literature:

Native American writing represents an attempt to recover identity and authenticity by invoking and incorporating the world found within the oral tradition--the reality of myth and ceremony--an authorless "original" literature. (11)

These translations and identity can be found in Erdrich's textual interpretations in her novels and poetry. Her rhetoric in story telling reveals a

reverence for the oral tradition. Additionally, Erdrich incorporates the heritage of the trickster tales. Trickster humor in Erdrich's novels Tracks and Love Medicine has been noted by Catt and Vizenor. Study of the trickster in the poems and The Beet Queen will be a major aspect of this study. The trickster is key in fulfilling Vizenor's fourth qualification:

The narrative voices or comic holotrope, the signifier in a trickster narrative, is signified in *chance*. The trickster is a semiotic sigh, closer in connotation to an iconic sign than to the arbitrary symbolic signification or causal representation in semiotic theories. The trickster sign wanders between narrative voices and comic chance in oral presentations. (189)

Vizenor has also observed that the trickster type is an ideal metaphor for the mixed blood experience:

Well, the mixed-bloods are between [worlds], so's the trickster; he's neither tradition nor antitradition; he's not power or weakness. And a mixed-blood must waver in the blood and it's difficult to waver the page. You have to find some meaning not in the sides but in the seam in between and that's obviously where a mixed-blood, and earthdiver, a trickster, must try and find all meaning, imaginative meaning. (Coltelli 20)

Mixed-blood themselves, Erdrich, Dorris, and other major Native American novelists work a

balancing act, creating ontologically based texts that voice the realities of survival. As Louis Owens has observed:

Ultimately, whereas postmodernism celebrates the fragmentation and chaos of experience, literature by Native American authors tends to seek transcendence of such ephemerality and the recovery of "eternal and immutable" elements represented by a spiritual tradition that escapes historical fixation, that places humanity within a carefully, cyclically order cosmos and gives humankind irreducible responsibility for the maintenance of that delicate equilibrium. (20)

Part of that balance occurs in mediating cultures. Seeking that "delicate equilibrium" has been characteristic in Erdrich's work. She has described her writing as a search for voice and identity (Reno). In her essay "Where I Ought to Be: A Writer's Sense of Place," she describes the challenge facing herself and others:

Contemporary Native American writers have therefore a task quite different from that of other writers I've mentioned [Faulkner, Hawthorne, Cheever, Welty]. In the light of enormous loss, they must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of the catastrophe. (23)

Erdrich tells stories of survival with an equilibrium of grace and humor, violence and grief.

The rage that resonates in many current literatures of Native Americans is absent from Erdrich's own works. Naturally, there is tragedy, injustice, and frustration generated by the realities of the Native American experience. However, the humor and grace present in Erdrich's texts offer a compassion that may not lead to political resolution but reconciliation in humanity.

Vizenor contrasts Western Civilization as tragic monologues, Native American cultures as comic communal discourses. He suggests that the trickster is a comic and mediating *holotrope*:

The trickster animates this human adaptation in a comic language game . . . the environment bears the comedies and tragedies. (14)

Native Americans, as tragic victims of Western Civilization, must have a survival comedy, often manifest in trickster who establishes moral values.

An examination of values, "fixed norms" of a text, reveals cultural peculiarities through the author's voice. Erdrich presents values of orality, tribal community, historical awareness, ontology of place, mediation through trickster narratives, survival humor, and multicultural pluralism. These

understandings drive Erdrich's storytelling, as she recognizes:

"How, out of the millions and millions of people who were here in the beginning, the very few who survived into the 1920s, and the people who are alive today with some sense of their own tradition, how did it get to be me, and why?" And I think that quest and that impossibility really drives us in a lot of ways. It's central to the work, in a way, survivors of that tradition; there aren't a lot of people who are going to tell these stories, or who are going to look at the world this particular way. (Bonetti 99)

This survival occurs, in part, because cultures change and adapt through mediation. The Native American traditional stories survive through performance in a contemporary and Western Civilization medium such as novels and poetry. As James Ruppert observes:

Foremost, native American writers are mediators. Their art is patterned by a conceptual act of mediation. By mediation, I mean an artistic and conceptual stance which uses the epistemological frameworks of native American and white cultures to pattern and illuminate each other. That is not to say that these writers are apologists for one side or the other, but that they create an artistic dynamic that brings differing cultural codes into confluence to reinforce and recreate the structures of human life--the self, spirit, and the world we perceive. (209)

These structures reflect the cultural universe of the author, the multiplicity of Erdrich's heritage, Chippewa, Native American, German American, and Catholic.

Booth notes in The Rhetoric of Fiction that the author, or implied author, is always present in establishing norms:

Our sense of the implied author includes not only the extractable meaning but also the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all of the characters. (73)

Foucault also claims that the values of the author are always present, although as ideological empowerment. Ironically, Erdrich, as author, and her characters are speaking from disempowered places. Nevertheless, Erdrich's multiculturalism is omnipresent. Norms of morality and emotional content are culturally defined, creating a dialectic between cultures in Erdrich's works. The complexity of multiculturalism in both creator and audience is described by Owens:

The effect is a richly hybridized dialogue aimed at those few with privileged knowledge--the traditionally educated Indian reader--as well as those with claims to a privileged discourse--the Eurocentric reader. One effect of the hybridization is subversive; the American

Indian writer places the Eurocentric reader on the outside, as "other," while the Indian reader (a comparatively small audience) is granted, for the first time, a privileged position. On the one hand, by consciously identifying her- or himself as "Indian" the writer seeks to establish a basis for authoritative, or externally persuasive discourse; on the other hand, the writer must make that discourse internally persuasive for the non-Indian reader unaccustomed to peripherality. (14-15)

Whether identified as dialogism, irony, discourse or multiculturalism, by creating an intricate worldview through language, Erdrich recreates herself from her own history, experiences, and values. Seeking that voice in her works, through the storytelling, through the multicultural web of values, reveals our own voice and humanity whether we are from the margin or the mainstream.

Chapter 2

Words of a Remembered World: Poetry and The Oral Tradition

Louise Erdrich's poetry is her first published work, her own work without the collaborative effort of her husband, Michael Dorris. As an intensely personal genre, poetry intimately reveals Erdrich's voice as her fiction cannot. Evident in that voice are elements of the mosaic of cultural experiences that comprise Erdrich's life: Catholicism, German ancestry, working class, university education, and Chippewa. While some of Erdrich's poems garner their cultural rhetoric from differing points of view and values, most exhibit the variety of experience that results from marginalization inherent in the omnipresence of race.

Although Erdrich is not a traditional speaker or a reservation Indian, she bears the heritage of survival. Her poetry unmaskes a rhetoric of the oral tradition, presents structural rituals of the non-

literate and the highly ornamented, dramatizes storytelling, and obfuscates genres from classical sonnets to short story. The depth of her poetry exemplifies the complexity of the Erdrich's own universe, as well as the human experience.

The personal voice in Erdrich's poetry discloses the soul, the intangible manifestations of culture. As Erdrich observes:

I don't think any [theme] was very conscious. Poetry is a different process for me than writing fiction. Very little of what happens in poetry is conscious, it's a great surprise. (Bruchac 82)

In this interview with Joseph Bruchac, she also remarks that the Chippewa elements are obvious because they are not part of the mainstream. However, all factors of her background contribute to her source material.

Jacklight,¹ Erdrich's first collection of poems, was published in 1984, the same year as her first novel, Love Medicine. Most of these poems were written in 1977-1978 with a few additions for the final published version (Bruchac 84).

¹The following edition is used: Louise Erdrich, Jacklight (New York: Owl Book Paperbook, 1984). All subsequent references will be to this edition and noted parenthetically in the text.

Generally, Jacklight received favorable reviews, although the uncredited reviewer in Publisher's Weekly, apparently unaware of the high rhetoric of oral tradition, called the emotional energy "a performance of all peaks and no valleys." The title poem, "Jacklight," is set apart from the remaining forty poems. These poems are divided into sections, eight poems in "Runaways," eight poems in "Hunters," fifteen poems in "The Butcher's Wife," and thirteen poems in "Myths," although the volume presents a holistic view of Erdrich's multicultured universe.

Despite claiming in interviews that she would publish only fiction because her poetry had become too private (see Bruchac and George), Erdrich's second volume, Baptism of Desire,² was issued in 1989. This collection is passionate and intimate, more intensely confronting mysticism, religion, and ontological questions than Jacklight. Erdrich notes in Baptism of Desire that "most . . . poems in this book were written between the hours of two and four

²The following edition is used: Louise Erdrich, Baptism of Desire (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991). All subsequent references will be to this edition and noted parenthetically in the text.

in the morning, a period of insomnia brought on by pregnancy" (48). The most frequent observation in reviews is that perhaps Erdrich is a better storyteller than a lyricist. However, Gettner notes the power of her poetic imagery, "Through the experience of motherhood, we suspect, the world's and God's threat may actually subside."

The volume is divided into five untitled parts. The first section contains nine poems relating to ritual and Catholicism. Part Two, six poems, is a continuation of narratives and characterizations from "The Butcher's Wife" section of Jacklight. The third section is a five part poem titled "Hydra." Part Four continues seven short stories of Potchikoo, the trickster cycle begun in the "Myths" section of Jacklight. The volume concludes with a fifth section of twelve exceptionally personal and reflective poems.

For the purposes of this study, and, considering the continuation of subject and narratives from Jacklight and Baptism of Desire, both volumes will be considered together. The holistic nature of Native American literatures challenges traditional genres, styles, and

categorization. However, an organizing rubric is necessary. General categories under which the poems will be considered are: personal and reflective poems, primarily Part Five of Baptism of Desire; ritualistic poems, "Hunters," "Myths," of Jacklight, and Part One and Part Three of Baptism of Desire; and narrative poems, "Runaways," "The Butcher's Wife," the Potchikoo section of "Myths" in Jacklight, and Parts Two and Four of Baptism of Desire. This arrangement is not mutually exclusive, with some poems falling into more than one category. Likewise, it is not all-inclusive of the styles and content of Erdrich's poetry.

Personal and Reflective Poems

The condensing of language into poetry is the tradition of Western Civilization, reflecting the soul, spirit of the times, the ideology, and the culture of the author. This lyric heritage finds a comfortable companion in the oral tradition of Native American cultures where the rhetoric is high, the language sacred. Erdrich's poetry fuses the lyric legacy of Euro-America with the non-literate, yet musical and mystical heritage of the Chippewa.

This personal and individual voice contrasts with the communal voices found in Erdrich's fiction and some of the poetry. Nevertheless, this individuality reflects the strength of a tribal background where women are vital to the community.

Although all of Erdrich's poetry is intrinsically personal, as her writing is a quest for her own identity; some poems take on a fierce passion, exposing the self. The poems most characteristic of this revelation are found in Part Five of Baptism of Desire. Additionally, some poems that are more narrative or ritualistic than lyrical in character also bare the heart of the author.

The poems of Part Five of Baptism of Desire include: "The Fence," "Ninth Month," "Birth," "Sunflowers," "Translucence," "The Glass and the Bowl," "Wild Plums," "The Flight," "The Return," "The Flood," "Owls," and "The Ritual." As evident from the titles, these poems are a retrospection of birth and relationships, of planting and cultivating metaphors.

The love of mother and child, because of its intimacy and tenderness, has the potential for greatness in art but also tempts the hazard of sappy

sentimentality. Erdrich elevates the warmth and love without lapsing into mawkishness with the metaphor of planting and cultivating in "The Fence":

Then one day the gray rags vanish
 and the sweet wind rattles her sash.
 Her secrets bloom hot. I'm wild for
 everything.
 My body is a golden armor around my unborn
 child's body,
 and I'll die happy, here on the ground.
 I bend to the mixture of dirt, chopped
 hay,
 grindings of coffee from our dark winter
 breakfasts.
 I spoon the rich substance around the
 acid-loving shrubs.
 I tear down last year's drunken vines,
 pull the black rug off the bed of
 asparagus
 and lie there, know by June I'll push the
 baby out
 as easily as seed wings fold back from the
 cotyledon.
 I see the first leaf already, the veined
 tongue
 rigid between the thighs of the runner
 beans.
 I know how the shoot will complicate
 itself
 as roots fill the trench.
 Here is the link fence, the stem doubling
 toward it,
 and something I've never witnessed.
 One moment the young plant trembles on its
 stalk.
 The next, it has already gripped the wire.
 Now it will continue to climb, dragging
 rude blossoms
 to the other side
 until in summer fruit like green
 scimitars,
 the frieze of vines, and then the small
 body
 spread before me in need

drinking light from the shifting wall of
 my body,
 and the fingers, tiny stems wavering to
 mine,
 flexing for the ascent. (61)

More than the obvious comparison of planting and cultivating, this poem explores the miracle of life. The mother has unexplained desire, motivated by the natural cycles of the earth. The imagery of fertilization, the implied father sharing the winter coffee, and the sexual suggestions acknowledge the paradox of union and individuality. The father is essential while only the mother knows the solitary nature of child-bearing. Still, the mother is simply the incubator for the individual to be born, another paradox of union and separation illustrated in the line: "I'll push the baby out."

The autonomy of the child to be born, combined with its essential dependence, is symbolized in the unexplained behavior of the plant. As the plant intertwines with the fence, the symbiotic nature of mother and child is revealed in its complexities of joys and sorrows with oxymorons of "rude blossoms" and contrasting "fruit" with "scimitars."

The poem is a universal expression, yet masks cultural cues. The birthing metaphor of

fertilization, planting, sprouting is ubiquitous. However, the familiarity of the natural elements in this poem, and other poems of this section as well, unveils a relationship with place and nature derived from Chippewa values. The life-giving source of the earth, apparent in mother earth imagery divulges a sensitivity and awareness from a culture that has depended on the natural earth for every aspect of life. The earth, the place, is life-giving, spirit-defining, ontological.

Additionally, Erdrich has no shame or anguish in the traditional feminine division of labor--both in cultivating and birthing. Rather than wallowing in modern angst by questioning or rebelling, Erdrich finds joy and celebration in a tradition. As Paula Gunn Allen observes of the Native American matriarchal heritage:

The tribes see women variously, but they do not question the power of femininity. Sometimes they see women as fearful, sometimes peaceful, sometimes omnipotent and omniscient, but they never portray women as mindless, helpless, simple, or oppressed. And while the women in a given tribe, clan, or band, may be all these things, the individual woman is provided with a variety of images of women, from the interconnected supernatural, natural, and social worlds she lives in. (44)

In Part Five of Baptism of Desire, further celebrations of this feminine power are evident. In a Native American worldview, the sacred and the mundane interweave, and all acts are spiritual. "Sunflowers" recounts the ritual of diapering and caring for little ones:

When I walk into their bedroom at night
 their cries fill my own mouth
 so full of accurate misery,

 Slowly, with both my hands,
 I smooth along the hairline, throbbing
 with attention
 across the wishbone, the heart
 vivid as a light,
 down the arms, their tiny velvet muscles
 the arching torso, missing only the cleft
 inside the diaper,
 then the fat thighs, wet backs of the
 knees,
 and the feet, small wooden apples. (64)

Through the power of language, the physical merges with the immaterial. The loving touch of anatomy becomes a consecrated manifestation, a spiritual and physical knowing and intimacy.

In "Sunflowers" and other poems that reflect motherhood, such as "Birth," "Translucence," and "The Glass and the Bowl," this private parental connection is shared with the father. Reflecting a society of union and alliance rather than the individualism and alienation predominant in

mainstream feminism and Americanisms, the father is vital to motherly devotion.

Indeed, the poems of companion love are not in tradition of Western poems of objectification or forbidden passion, where the loved one is possessed or outside of the economic bonds of marriage.³ Erdrich, again, establishes an interdependence and symbiosis in union, ratified by ritual and communal conception. The series of poems "The Sacraments" celebrate connubial love and will be discussed under the category Poetry of Ritual. However, images from poems of Part Five illustrate the father/husband functions: he is present at the birth of each child, "each name a net in his hands" (63). He shares domestic care, bringing "the cold milk in bottles" (64). In "Translucence," during illness, he nurses her, and later she calls for him:

I'm nothing like, you, nothing suddenly,
although your voice comes large as dusk
now, calm
and brims around me like a well,
.....

³See Denis de Rougement, Love in the Western World (New York: Harper Colophon, 1974), for a discussion of objectification of love and marriage in novels and poetry.

It was like this when I had the baby.
 Looking at you in extremity, so trapped in
 flesh, the body's gates slammed closed
 between us. (67)

The paradox of motherhood and marriage is that
 of separation and unity, the oneness and sameness
 while still independent. The physical distinctions
 of male and female cannot be erased, yet they are
 overcome, ironically, through physical union and
 through language and spirit, as described in "The
 Owls":

That is how we make love,
 when there are people in the halls around
 us,
 clashing dishes, filling their mouths
 with air, with debris, pulling
 switches and filters as the whole
 machinery
 of life goes on, eliminating and
 eliminating
 until there are just the two bodies
 fiercely attached, the feathers
 floating down and cleaving to their
 shapes. (75-76)

The Biblical and marital allusion of "cleaving"
 presents the duality of separateness and union,
 emphasizing the contradictions and resolutions of
 this passage. The ambient noises and interruptions
 place the sexual act in a context of real life
 rather than idealized place and time, while
 preserving the intimacy of the moment.

In "Train," from Jacklight, the self is discovered through the "other." The poem begins with "Our bodies keep spilling their sweet, heavy freight / as the night goes." The journey of self discovery finds a literal and figurative balance.

Here is the charge I carried, the ballast
I chose to go down with,
the ponderous soul.
Here is the light I was born with, love.
Here is the bleak radiance that levels the
world. (25)

The "level" implies equilibrium, reconciliation, and an even playing ground or opportunity.

In the final poem of Baptism of Desire, "The Ritual," motherhood and wifery are fused in the ceremony of living, reiterating the familial patterns, while being expressed in an individual and personal voice.

Soon, I say to the unborn one turning
beneath the heart of the sleeping woman,
you will break from me and be recognized.
You will drink from me as the dark rushes
by
then curl with your ear to your father's
chest
all night, the first night,
calmed by his heart instead of mine in
your new life.
.....
I return to our bed and climb down the
wedding quilt,
the twelve-branched tree of life.

When we sleep together, when we breathe
 each other's breath,
 the crown spreads, the leaves scorch to
 bronze,
 the slow growth accelerates
 and the trunk swells, ring upon ring,
 until the slightest twigs scrape at the
 solid frost-blue
 of the floor of heaven.
 In the tremor of the long, receding
 footsteps
 we awaken. The day is ordinary,
 sunlight fans across the ceiling. (78)

The ordinary tasks of living are elevated to
 the personal and eternal. The "twelve branched tree
 of life" may be symbolic of Hebraic tribes, with
 eternal covenants or a confluence of the holy
 numbers three and four. The sacredness and
 commonality of living is ritualized through
 language. Erdrich seems to understand that to find
 one's own identity and self, account must be taken
 in responsibilities and relationships to the
 "other." Recognizing the "otherness" of a child or
 a husband or the life giving earth reveals more
 about self than introspection.

Erdrich's personal poems expose the most
 intimate relationships with self, companion, and
 child. These poems reveal passion, commitment, and
 a voice comprised of values, ethics, and a fusion of

the personal culture of EuroAmerica and the communal culture of Native America.

Poetry of Ritual

Ritual is an enactment of myth or sacred belief. While Erdrich's more personal poems demonstrated profound values placed in a context of multicultural rhetoric, much of her poetry is a performance of beliefs derived from her variegated heritage, primarily Catholic and Chippewa. Nevertheless, these poems also reveal a personal and communal voice. As ritual effaces differences in a society, it establishes community or oneness. Erdrich's poems manifest the paradox of individuation occurring within and being defined by communal relationships.

Erdrich's poetry that alludes to or imitates ritual fulfills Michel Benamou's four characteristics of ethnopoetics:

- 1> To reunify us with the human past . . .
 to salute the first shamans
 and the communal,
 ecological, and religious functions
 of poetry;

- 2> To reoralize the poem by performance;
 - 3> To reterritorialize language; and
 - 4> To retotalize the human community
- (152).

Ritual implies structure and pattern. An apparent contradiction exists in the erasing of hierarchy that can take place in a ritual, as all participants are equal, therefore creating *communitas*. The structure and ritualistic performance of Erdrich's poems reflect an oral or non-literate tradition that emphasizes that communal or tribal society. However, the personal rhetoric of her poetry, as discussed in the previous section, also displays the influences of Western Tradition.

Erdrich relies on both the European ritualistic conventions and the mythic sources of the Chippewa. Part One of Baptism of Desire demonstrates Catholicism, Part Three, "Hydra," the liberal arts and ritualistic heritage of Greek civilization and Western *belles lettres*. "Hunters" and "Myths" of Jacklight present a Native American structure derived from an oral tradition.

The poems of Part One of Baptism of Desire and two poems from Part Two, "The Kitchen Gods" and "The

Carmelites," are conspicuously Catholic. Erdrich attended Catholic parochial schools and speaks of her religious background:

I guess I have my beefs about Catholicism. Although you never change once you're raised a Catholic--you've got that. You've got that symbolism, that guilt, you've got the whole works and you can't really change that. That's easy to talk about because you have to exorcise it somehow. (Bruchac 81)

Indeed, the title of the collection stems from Catholic doctrine whereby a person with sincere desire, but unable to perform the technical act of baptism, may receive the blessings of that ordinance (Jaskoski 55). Erdrich melds natural human desires into the ritual structure of Catholic belief. The title, Baptism of Desire, also has a playful meaning, suggesting that desire could be cleansed by baptismal ritual or that one could be purified by being immersed with desire. The coexistent danger and redemption of desire becomes a pharmokos, with the potential to either destroy or deliver.

The poems of Part One are: "Fooling God," Saint Clare," "Avila," "The Visit," "The Savior," "Christ's Twin," "Orozco's Christ," "Mary Magdalene," "Angels," and "The Sacraments." Erdrich

injects these topics with ironic and iconoclastic tensions characteristic of twentieth century Modernism, undercutting the institutional power and divinity of religion. However, unlike the Modernism of James Joyce, who rejects Catholicism for the religious pursuit of art, Erdrich transforms the creed, infusing ritual and history with personal interpretations and Native American imagery. This amalgamation and embracing of religious tradition and modern arts, crossing the virtual natures of the plastic and literary, is evident in "Orozco's Christ":

Who rips his own flesh down the seams and
 steps
 forth flourishing the axe,
 who chops down his own cross,
 who straddles it,
 who stares like a cat,
 whose cheeks are the gouged blue of
 science,
 whose torso springs out of wrung cloth
 blazing ochre, blazing rust, whose blood
 cools to black marble in his fist,
 who make his father kneel,
 who make his father say,
 "You want her? Take her."
 Who rolls the stone from the entrance over
 his mother,
 who pulls her veil out from under it,
 who ties the stained cloth around his hips
 and starts out,
 walking toward Damascus, toward Beirut,
 where they are gathering in his name.
 (15)

By referring to this specific painting of political artist Jose Orozco (1883-1949), Erdrich crosses several cultural boundaries. Orozco was deeply influenced by the traditions of Mexican Indians (Lamm 362) but painted in the medium of Western Civilization, just as Erdrich comes from an oral tradition but writes and publishes in Western genres of poetry and novels. Also, Mexico is a deeply Catholic country that has merged European practices with native beliefs. Orozco's suffering Christ--probably Cristo destruyendo la Cruz from the 1932-34 frescos at Dartmouth College--need not be seen to capture Erdrich's interpretation of art, religion and ritual of crucifixion. The intense style of Orozco's painting is matched by the rhythm and passion of Erdrich's words. The repetition of the word "who" and "whose" beginning eleven of the eighteen lines of the poem adds a musical incantatory, further blurring divisory lines of the arts.

This powerful Christ is violent and destructive with the opening line, "Who rips his own flesh." The brutal images are institutionalized by the painting and descriptions of vibrant colors, visual

art remaining static in time. This Christ manages his own fate, chopping down his own cross, challenging and defying the Father, consuming the significance of Mary with the stone and his own resurrective strength.

This resurrected Jesus embarks on his journey to establish Christianity as a savage authority. The Pauline image of Damascus implies tumultuous conversion of ancient world to radical Christianity. Beirut is a modern battlefield, a reminder that bloody conflicts are erroneously justified by religious ideologies. The particular image of Orozco's painted Christ recalls the indigenous cultures that were sacrificed to powers of Catholicism. Again, unlike Joyce, whose crisis of faith faced nihilism, only to be filled with art, Erdrich's crisis is tragic, knowing that Christianity is culpable for the deicide of Native gods.

Erdrich struggles with the evils of Christian institutions and personal desires and faith. This inescapable predicament is personalized in "Fooling God" (3-4). The futility of trying to escape God and religious upbringing is juxtaposed against the

Nicean characteristics of divinity. The speaker cannot become so small to hide from God or so large to overpower and eliminate him. The attempt to "lose myself" only identifies that self to God. God's knowing is intimate and sexual. Although embracing self reliance, "I must become essential and file everything / under my own system," God is omnipresent. Doubts prevail, yet there is a longing for those who "taste everlasting life." The articulation of the poem itself acknowledges the vain effort of "Fooling God."

Like other poems, "Fooling God" does not have an immediacy of Native American rhetoric. Its confidential topic of a personal struggle with faith is more characteristic of the European influences in Erdrich's life; faith is an acquisition in Western belief but axiomatic in non-western cosmology. However, minute clues indicate the mediation of cultures. The lines "I must insert myself into the bark of his apple trees, / and cleave the bones of his cows," allude both to the Edenic forbidden fruit and the magical transformation of a doubting trickster who could enter a tree. The kneeling women "[o]n the pavement where his house begins"

suggest an image of the Cathedral of Guadalupe, a fusion of Catholicism and Mexican Indian supernaturalism.

For the readers who may not have a Catholic catechism, introductory notes explain historical backgrounds of Saint Clare and Rodrigo, brother of Teresa of Avila. "Saint Clare" is a collection of four poems, subtitled "The Call," "Before," "My Life as a Saint," and "Agnes." Although this poem explores the requirements of renunciation and sainthood, as Clare commits her life to St. Francis, it is also a narrative reflection of those events.

The collection of "The Sacraments" include the seven ceremonial practices of Baptism, Communion, Confirmation, Matrimony, Penance, Holy Orders and Extreme Unction. These sections present experiences of intimacy and nature and Native American images, characteristic of the reflective poems of Part Five. "Baptism" has ritualistic sun dancers, "Communion" has singing frogs and a wedding bed, "Confirmation" prophesies Erdrich's own three children. "Matrimony" sets the vows of "standard words" in a "landscape" of "willows," "the sun," a "tilted earth," and "snow." "Penance" expresses guilt over

marital conflict. "Holy Orders" are intimate, and "Extreme Unction" uses decaying images of nature. These poems have apparently little in common with communal liturgical practices but invoke the personal and particular experience of the individual and images derived from a culture that depends on the earth.

Similarly, "Christ's Twin" uses a Native American approach, suggesting that a shadow of Jesus existed. This doubling corresponds to the hero twins, common in Native American myth. Christ's twin functions as a trickster, playing pranks, manipulating miracles, "clumsy and curious." This counterpart to pious Jesus again suggests the darker forces of Christianity from a Native American perspective.

Part Three of Baptism of Desire is a lengthy poem entitled "Hydra" and is derived from Greek mythic structure. In a page of explanatory notes, Erdrich identifies the Greek background:

Hydra was the nine-headed serpent slain by Hercules in the marsh of Lerna. Each head when cut off was succeeded by two new ones, unless the wound was cauterized. Hydra is also a multifarious source of destruction that cannot be eradicated by any single attempt, and it is the southern

constellation below Cancer, also called
the Water Monster. (48)

This elaborate explication plays with variable meanings, like the title of this volume and the title Jacklight. The five sections of the poem are full of mysticism, astrology, allusion, and meaning. Repetitive images of birth, baptism, and mothering invoke the richness and sorrows of the human experience. Erdrich mixes the popular and the classical, the natural and the artificial, the sacred and the mundane:

Hour of the talk-show hostess.
Hour of the wolf, of the tree service,
of the worship of the god whose name add
to a single year. Abraxas, the perfect
word.

She explains in a footnote:

abraxas is a name containing Greek letters
which as numerals amount to 365. It is,
therefore, a mystical word, a charm
engraved on gemstones, and a god of
uncertain origin.

This ritualistic use of language is
enhanced by references to ceremonial
practices. (48)

She recounts Christmas and New Years and the ritual sacrifice of the Lamb. These holy images are degraded by "the crystal of Christ Tortured / sold on Shoppers Cable Network." The patterns of the earth are ritualized:

Here we are in the sacred monotony.
 Her we are riding the snake,
 stuck on each radiant spine, as the days
 shorten toward the equinox.

 The world tips away in plenary motion

The snake image of the Hydra invades the poem with a scattering of common and extraordinary, sacred and profane, ritual and chaos. The evil connotation of the serpent in the Garden is juxtaposed with non-western suggestions of new skin and new life. These polar oppositions are unified in the language and density of the poem itself and the voice of the speaker, presumably the author, herself. The synthesis of dialectics, alluding to the Greek sources, is also evident in the variety of cultures mediated in the poem: Chippewa, Greek, Euro-American, television, and Catholic.

Ritual in poems with an overt Native American content appear in the title poem of Jacklight and its "Hunters" and "Myths" sections. "Hunters" contains the poems "The Woods," "The Levelers," "Train," "Captivity," "Chahinkapa Zoo," "The King of Owls," "Painting of a White Gate and Sky," and "Night Sky." The titles of the poems of the "Myths" section are: "I Was Sleeping Where the Black Oaks

Move," "The Strange People," "The Lefavor Girls," "Three Sisters," "Whooping Cranes," "Old Man Potchikoo," "Windigo," "The Red Sleep of Beasts," and "Turtle Mountain Reservation." The "Old Man Potchikoo" collection will be analyzed under the Narrative Poetry section of this chapter.

Many of these poems are narratives, reciting and recreating ancestral tales. They are included under this section of ritual because of their source in the sacred beliefs and traditions of Native peoples. The recounting of myth, although presented by Erdrich in a published medium, is fundamental to ritual. Storytelling is a sacred and ritualistic performance and Erdrich enriches this practice with modern metaphors. Once again, the literature of Native America defies conventional categories and genres. An example of Erdrich's mythic and ritual poetry, "Whooping Cranes," is dedicated to her maternal grandmother, Mary Gournneau:

*Our souls must be small as mice
to fit through the hole of
heaven.
All the time it is shrinking
over Pembina.*

The newborn cried across the road
night and day until they buried
its mother at the Mission.

You found it in a ditch
 sucking tea from a bottle
 and took him home. This boy grew
 strange and secret among the others,
 killing crows with his bare hands
 and kissing his own face in the mirror.

One year everything dried up.
 You held the boy toward heaven
 so that his mother could see
 you had managed to keep him fat.
 Bands of hot dust were lifting.
 Seed wings burnt
 off the boxelders.
 When the white cranes sailed over
 trumpeting the boy's name
 you let go
 and he flew into their formation.

*They were the last flight.
 Their wings scraped the clouds
 dead white.
 Their breasts were arks.
 Their beaks were swords that
 barred the gate.
 And the sky closed after them.
 (73)*

The reader does not need to know the full canon of Chippewa legend to discern mythological tradition in this poem. In many Native American origin myths a hole in the sky is an entrance for human beings into this earthly existence. "Pembina" is the region where the Turtle Mountain Chippewa reside in North Dakota. The mystery surrounding the birth of the child recalls Joseph Campbell's suggestions of the monomythic miracle birth of the hero. The locale of the Mission and the tea in a baby bottle

place the poem in a recent time rather than mythical time.

The character of the young boy, however, is clearly in a mythical realm. His strangeness and supernatural strength distinguish him. The killing of the crows suggest a religious sacrifice, as the crow or raven is often an incarnation of trickster. The implication is unclear; the black crows may represent an evil to be eradicated or, as trickster, may be decide of native belief. Again, Erdrich mixes cultural references as the boy, like Greek Narcissus, admires his own image.

The drought described in the second full stanza demonstrates the relationship between survival and the natural elements of the earth. The boy is once more distinguished as his health and well-being are preserved by the implied community during desperate times. The whooping cranes that fly overhead accept the ritualized and sacrificial offering, taking him up in transformation. The white imagery suggests purity, another sign of appropriate designation for holy sacrifice.

This poem expresses fear of the parallel disappearance of the sacred boy and venerable

traditions. As the cranes take him away, in a "last flight," they close the sky against the human world below. The "arks" of the breasts of the cranes imply the Judeo/Christianity of Noah, as the boy flees to a new world, closed to those below. The earth is split from the sky, but the boy and the cranes mediate that fragmentation. The moral sense that accompanies this poem presents a divisive world: good and evil, earth and sky, fullness and drought, abandonment and acceptance, mediated by the boy who transforms and joins a community of cranes. He is, nevertheless, not of the world as he is transported beyond a "barred gate" and a closed sky. The caretaking attitude toward the boy, despite his differences reflect communal values. Wholeness encompasses the natural elements, sky and earth, and the varied cultures represented in the poem through the metaphorical paradox of separation and community. The boy, born of elements of Native American mythology, ascending with images of Christianity becomes the intermediary of dual cultures.

Erdrich invokes Chippewa tradition in the title poem, "Jacklight." The poem has this explanatory note:

The same Chippewa word is used both for flirting and hunting game, while another Chippewa word connotes both using force in intercourse and also killing a bear with one's bare hands. [R. W. Dunning, (1959) Social and Economic Change Among the Northern Ojibwa] (3)

This deconstructive use of language is modulated in the poem to create a dialectical meaning. The hunters and the hunted are indistinguishable as power is transformed. Erdrich comments on this counterpoint of the poem:

I am trying to say something like this: if our relationships are ever going to be human, and not just play-by-numbers, men have to follow women into the woods and women likewise. There must be an exchange, a transformation, a power shared between them. (George 243)

Rather than eliminating meaning, the duality of the language creates a new manner of thinking about power of the hunters and the hunted. Not only is this transformation male/female but could represent any power exchange, including that of cultures.

It is their turn now,
their turn to follow us. Listen,
they put down their equipment.
It is useless in the tall brush.

And now they take the first steps, not
 knowing
 how deep the woods are and lightless.
 How deep the woods are.

The ritual of hunting is derived from historic subsistence needs. The ritual recounting in "Jacklight" intimates that, as cultures change, the complexity of universe becomes both more enlightened and more shadowed.

Erdrich continues the Chippewa traditions with allusions to the mythical hero, Nanabozho (Nanapush), in "The Woods." References are made to his "headdress," a "breastplate," and the holy "mittens of blood." Erdrich also alludes with sexual imagery to the "Jacklight" of the title poem as "Light bleeds from the clearing." However, in this poem the trickster cannot escape the speaker and must redefine his mythic purpose.

A ritual of American culture is expressed in "Captivity." While narrative in structure, the poem re-tells, in poetic rhetoric, the incarceration of Mary Rowlandson. In the practice of captivity narratives, the poem ritually re-enacts the experience, but with a reversal in attitude. Instead of fearing rape by her captors, Erdrich's

Mary acknowledges sexual attraction. She is also much more aware of the natural and surrounding world. She practices her own ritual of prayer while her captor practices hunting rites, again with sexual metaphor.

Other, seemingly mundane, practices are ritualized in Erdrich's poetry. A zoo visit in "Chahinkapa Zoo" becomes "heavy with the ancient life." Card playing is ceremonialized in "The King of Owls." Drawing on Native American sources, the ritual of the buffalo hunt is memorialized in "The Red Sleep of Beasts." Erdrich assumes the thoughtful and emotional voice of a transforming antelope, in "The Strange People." The devilish "Windigo" of Chippewa pantheon is personified. The myth of the bear and seduction is mixed with the Greek naming of stars in the four part poem, "Night Sky."

The mixture of cultures is evident in the first stanza of "Turtle Mountain Reservation," dedicated to "Pat Gourneau, my grandfather":

The heron makes a cross
flying low over the marsh.
Its heart is an old compass
pointing off in four directions.
It drags the world along,

the world it becomes.

The cross is a standard symbol of Christianity, recognizing the Catholic influence among the Chippewa. The sign is deconstructed, though, by identifying it with the center of the sacred compass or hoop used by the Northern Plains culture groups. The pronoun "it" is deliberately vague, obscuring whether Christianity or sacred tradition is changing the world, or, ambiguous, perhaps, because both cultures are adapting and surviving.

The ritual basis of Erdrich's poetry blends her multicultural backgrounds. Ritual structure manifests primarily in Catholicism and Chippewa tradition. Other cultural sources include the liberal arts and Americanisms. However, most poems are permeated by Native American awareness. Ritual mixes with narrative performance, recalling orality of Native cultures, and blurring genres and conventions.

Narrative Poetry

The heritage of narrative poetry extends back to the Greek epic in Western Civilization and is fundamental to the oral tradition of non-literate

cultures. Some narrative approaches to ritualistic poetry have already been discussed. Additionally, Erdrich creates character, place, and story in both short pieces and extended cycles. These narrative techniques, combined with lyrical images prefigure her fiction and, again, question categories and genres. The narrative poems include short narratives, The Butcher's Wife cycle and the Potchikoo tales.

The short narratives are found in the "Runaways" section of Jacklight, and include "A Love Medicine," "Family Reunion," "Indian Boarding School: The Runaways," "Dear John Wayne," "Rugaroo," "Francine's Room," "The Lady in the Pink Mustang," and "Walking in the Breakdown Lane." These poems are Erdrich's most bitter representations of the current social problems and challenges for Native Americans, but without the survival humor and mediating grotesqueness found in her fiction. These works are not hopeless, though, and Erdrich sees redemption, a concept she will expand in the novel of the same title, in the poem "A Love Medicine":

Still it is raining lightly
in Wahpeton. The pickup trucks
sizzle beneath the blue neon

bug traps of the dairy bar.

Theresa goes out in green halter and
chains
that glitter at her throat.
This dragonfly, my sister,
she belongs more than I
to this night of rising water.

The Red River swells to take the bridge.
She laughs and leaves her man in his
Dodge.
He shoves off to search her out.
He wears a long rut in the fog.

And later, at the crest of the flood,
when the pilings are jarred from their
sockets
and pitch into the current,
she steps against the fistwork of a man.
She goes down in wet grass
and his boot plants its grin
among the arches of her face.

Now she feels her way home in the dark.
The white-violet bulbs of the streetlamps
are seething with insects,
and the trees lean down aching and empty.
The river slaps at the dike works,
insistent.

I find her curled up in the roots of a
cottonwood.
I find her stretched out in the park,
where all night
the animals are turning in their cages.
I find her in a burnt-over ditch, in a
field
that is gagging on rain,
sheets of rain sweep up down
to the river held tight against the
bridge.

We see that now the moon is leavened and
the water,
as deep as it will go,
stops rising.

Where we wait for the night to take us
 the rain ceases. *Sister there is nothing*
I would not do. (7-8)

This poem tells a story of a particular woman, Theresa, who becomes every woman who has suffered repression and violence as the speaker finds her in the cottonwood roots, in the park, and in "a burnt-over ditch." The location is specific to Erdrich's environment, Wahpeton, North Dakota, small town with a mixed population. The character of Theresa is imprisoned by culture and her social position--female and racial. She is captive to the "halter" and gold chains at her throat.

The dramatic situation becomes archetypal as the rains descend. The natural elements become violent, paralleling the violence of the man Theresa abandons. The earth aches with her as streetlamps "[seethe] with insects," trees ache, "the river slaps," and the fields "[gag] on the rain."

The flood images are a pharmokos, that may either drown Theresa or redeem her from her cycle of self-destruction. Lunar images, receding water, the strength of dikes and bridges, overcome the oppression of caged animals, burned ditches, drowning fields, uprooted pilings. When the moon is

revealed, light in the sky, and the waters and the rain cease, the burden of affliction is lifted. The compassionate plea to relieve suffering, "Sister there is nothing I would not do," could be Christian in its charity, tribal in its communal caring.

Erdrich has said of this poem:

I was sort of making that poem up as a love medicine, as a sort of healing love poem. So, I suppose there are all kinds of love and ways to use poetry and that was what I tried to do with it. (Bruchac 82)

She also has said "Salvation comes in love, or true feeling, love medicine" (Sears 7).

True feeling and healing occurs in other narrative poems. In "Francine's Room," the title character is a prostitute who follows the rodeo circuit. Each year Francine returns to the same shabby hotel room in Tarsus, city of St. Paul's origin. In an ironic inversion of Paul's conversion, she is baptized and turned to her self-destruction as "The body wash[es] in dust." Failed ritual parallels her failed life. However, like other poems of desperation, Erdrich offers hope:

What mending there is
occurs in small acts,
and after the fact of the damage,
when nothing is ever enough. (16)

Not all poems from "Runaways" propose redemption. "The Lady in the Pink Mustang" exploits her sexual allure, consuming her body and her soul. In "Walking in the Breakdown Lane" the speaker is literally and figuratively marginalized in hopelessness.

Walking in the breakdown lane, margin of
gravel
between the cut swaths and the road to
Fargo,
I want to stop, to lie down
in standing wheat or standing water. (19)

The speaker is as imprisoned as the cattle in the trucks that pass her by.

In "Family Reunion" Raymond Twobears suffers the duality of urban Indians. Inner conflict of cultures explodes in alcoholism and violence. In the concluding stanza, versification lapses as the passage appears more like prose:

Somehow we find our way back. Uncle Ray
sings an old song to the body that pulls
him
toward home. The gray fins that his hands
have become
screw their bones in the dashboard. His
face
has the odd, calm patience of a child who
has always
let bad wounds alone, or a creature that
has lived
for a long time underwater. And the
angels come lowering their slings and
litters. (10)

Ray's desperate suffering is relieved by ritual singing, by the recurring *pharmokos* baptismal/drowning imagery, by angels, and by a search for the "way back . . . toward home."

The Native American quest is not one of self-actualization but a journey toward tribal community and recovering traditions; however those may have been altered by cultural adaptation. This journey home becomes salvation for Raymond Twobears and the children in "Indian Boarding School: The Runaways"; and "Home's the place we head for in our sleep." The children are trying to return to their place, more than home and family, to their source of being "just under Turtle Mountains." Their relentless attempts to escape government schools personify the perseverance of Native cultures.

The irony of survival is set in "Dear John Wayne" where a group gathers at the drive-in theater. In a wonderful juxtaposition of images from the popular Western film genre, blue collar culture, and political subtexts, the poem plays on the Indian of the imagination. When the film is finished, "We are back in our skins," the slang of popular Indian culture, alluding to redskin and all

its attendant social roles, back in the protective cars and back in the "true-to-life dark."

Paradoxically, the Indian, as victim, owns the culture and the conquerors, personified in John Wayne, are the casualties of their own power:

How can we help but keep hearing his
voice,
the flip side of the sound track, still
playing:
*Come on boys, we got them
where we want them, drunk running.
They'll give us what we want, what we
need.*
Even his disease was the idea of taking
everything.
Those cells, burning, doubling, splitting
out of their skins.

The short narrative poems create their own universes of character, place, and story. The anger of victimage is reflected in these poems and mitigated by the "love medicine" of compassion and emotion. Many of these short narrative poems prefigure characters in the novels. "A Love Medicine," "Francine," "The Lady in the Pink Mustang," and "Walking in the Breakdown Lane" all have images that will reappear in the character and circumstances of June Morrissey in Love Medicine. "Family Reunion" develops into the "Crown of Thorns" chapter in Love Medicine. Obviously, "The Butcher's

Wife" cycle is transformed into the characters and circumstances of The Beet Queen.

"The Butcher's Wife" section of Jacklight contains fifteen poems that create characters in a small town butcher shop. These poems are: "The Butcher's Wife," "That Pull from the Left," "Clouds," "Shelter," "The Slow Sting of Her Company," "Here is a Good Word for Step-and-a-Half Waleski," "Portrait of the Town Leonard," "Leonard Commits Redeeming Adulteries with All the Women in Town," "Leonard Refuses to Atone," "Unexpected Danger," "My Name Repeated on the Lips of the Dead," "A Mother's Hell," "The Book of Water," "To Otto, in Forgetfulness," and "New Vows." Additionally, the five poems of Part Two of Baptism of Desire continue characters and ideas: "Rudy Comes Back," "Mary Kröger," "Poor Clare," "Bidwell Ghost," and "The Carmelites."

The titles alone establish a community of characters. While there is not a sustaining plot line, the poems trace events in the lives of Mary Kröger, her husband, Otto, Step-and-a-half-Waleski, Hilda (Otto's strange sister), Leonard, Rudy J. V. Jacklitch, his mother, and Clare, rendering these

characters as memorable as any in novels. The vignettes used in these short narratives presage the style Erdrich adopts in her novels. They can stand alone as short narrative poems, capturing a moment of life, creating viable characters, and establishing a setting. When combined to present recurring characters and sequential events, the cycle of poems, like the short fictions of the novels, presents a comprehensive view of a community.

These poems are the most direct evidence of Erdrich's German American legacy. The group of poems in Jacklight is dedicated to Mary Korll, Erdrich's grandmother. Erdrich identifies her source and creative process:

Yes, I do have a grandmother whose life vaguely resembles the life lived by Mary Kröger. She is a tough woman with a mystical bent who ran a butchershop for years and now lives in a tiny town in Minnesota and raises guinea hens. She's never pulled her punches with anybody, and I love her, but I wouldn't say that the poems are about her in particular. They are about a character, a fictional persona, someone I imagined myself in the skin of and wrote about. (George 244)

The fictional Mary Kröger marries Otto, the butcher. Their courtship, marriage, and Otto's

death occur in the three parts of the first poem, "The Butcher's Wife." In "Shelter," Mary reveals that she is the second Mary Kröger. The first wife, also named Mary, died, leaving four children whom Mary, the narrator, adopted. "Clouds," "The Book of Water," "To Otto, In Forgetfulness" and "New Vows" are Mary's reflections on her life with Otto. In "To Otto, in Forgetfulness," Mary tries to remember the loving details of life with him:

The words fell together one night,
and each night the dark story
of the body, we told
another way. Turn away

from me. Otto
F. Kröger. I do not
remember your voice in my hair.
Mary willst du, meine Kleine, noch wieder.
(72)

The German phrase translates: Mary will you, my little one, another time. The manifest elements of German culture emerge in the language, the occupation and physical details of the butchershop, the braids and stubbornness of his wife, the names, the foods, and the heartiness of the characters. While German peculiarities may be obvious, so is acculturation. The circumstances are representative of EuroAmerica where European cultures are

transformed into a new American society and adaptation accommodates similarities more easily than differences. The passion remembered in the stanza above, though, slips into the rhetoric of oral and traditional storytelling.

Another Native American characteristic emerges in the two characters of Leonard and Step-and-a-half Waleski. Step-and-a-half Waleski was suggested by Ralph Erdrich, the author's father (George 242). The witch-like woman is accepted by the community, rather than ostracized in "Here Is a Good Word for Step-and-a-half Waleski."

But mine is a good word, and even that
hurts.
A rhyme-and-a-half for a woman of parts,
because someone must pare the fruit soft
to the core
into slivers, must wrap the dead bones in
her skirts
and lay these things out on her table, and
fit
each oddment to each to resemble a life.

The good words, caretaking in the paring of fruit, and accepting oddness in the resemblance of Waleski's life reflect a community that values and protects differences. This community could occur anywhere but is more representative of tribal values than American self-interest.

Likewise, the Town Leonard is a trickster. Catholic manifestations are exhibited by the narrator (presumably Mary Kröger) who crosses herself when she sees Leonard and in her sardonic reference to the "Catholic church, whose twin white dunce caps speared the clouds for offering." Also, Leonard goes to confession each morning. Leonard undoes the Catholic traditions and the women in town:

They uncross themselves, forsaking
all protection
.....
Your mouths, like the seals of important
documents
break for me, destroying the ring's raised
signature,
the cracked edges melting to mine. (52-
53)

Ironically, the trickster Leonard offers redemption to these neglected women. He assumes a twin monster voice of Christ and, potentially, Satan:

*What sins have I done
that you should forsake me?*
.....
My life an act of contrition
for the sins of a whole town.
.....
You others, make vows,
quickly, before I snuff myself out
and become the dark thing
that walks among you,
pure, deaf, and full
of my own ingenious sins. (54-55)

Another Native American characteristic is a mythic allusion when Leonard falls through the sky, like the Chippewa myth of the Whooping Crane boy.

The mixture of cultural references continues in "My Name Repeated on the Lips of the Dead." Mary introduces the sheriff, Rudy J. V. Jacklitch. His surname is a play on the title, Jacklight, as an anagram of "litch" is "licht" or German for light. His mother is described as a "small spider of a woman," perhaps an maternal allusion to the Navajo deity Spider Woman or Cherokee Grandmother Spider, or interpreted as a Western allusion to the consuming possessiveness of a black widow. Rudy crashes his "light truck" and dies, saying Mary's name. Her Catholic guilt fears that her name will be eternalized in hell:

How I feared to have it whispered in their
mouths!

Mary Kröger
growing softer and thinner
till it dissolved
like a wafer under all that polishing.
(59)

This fear is an ironic inversion of the practice of many Native American tribes who have a sacred taboo

against speaking the names of their dead. Mary is still living, but her name is intoned by the dead.

Rudy comes back ("Rudy Comes Back") in Baptism of Desire. His ghost inhabits Mary's dog. He still clutches his bouquet of flowers, with which he had courted the widow Kröger. She persists in refusing Rudy:

The flower chafed to flames of dust in his
hands.
The earth drew the wind in like breath and
held on.
But I did not speak
or cry out
until the dawn, until the confounding
light.

Again, Erdrich uses images of the nature, acknowledging the earth as a living entity in a manner that reveals her Native American awareness.

The characters and setting of "The Butcher's Wife" are the seeds of The Beet Queen. Physical details of the setting of both the poems and the novel realistically recreate the butcher shop. The women who run the shop both have characteristics of Mary Kröger; Fritzie Kozka adopts her niece, Mary Adare, into her family, like Mary Kröger adopts her husband's sons. Mary Adare, as stalwart and sensible as Mary Kröger, inherits and runs the

butcher shop. Otto becomes Fritzie's husband, Pete, but the solitude of Mary Kröger's widowhood evolves into the spinsterhood of Mary Adare. Karl Adare, Mary's brother, Celestine's husband, Wallace Pfef's lover, and Dot's father, is like the mediating trickster, Town Leonard.

The narrative capturing of character and story in an economy of poetic language will be transferred to the short fictions that will form the novel. The genres of poetry and prose are structures of literatures of Western Civilization, made indistinguishable in Erdrich's works. This blurring of categories is a linguistic reflection of tribal communities where sacred beliefs are expressed without regard to literary structure but with particular attention to ritual intonation and setting. Erdrich's mixture of literary genres is evident in the lyrical imagery of her novels and the prose of the Potchikoo sections of the poetry collections.

In Jacklight, "Old Man Potchikoo" has four parts relating his mortal existence: "The Birth of Potchikoo," "Potchikoo Marries," "How Potchikoo Got Old," and "The Death of Potchikoo." In Baptism of

Desire the trickster continues his journey in the group of poems titled "Potchikoo's Life After Death," containing: "How They Don't Let Potchikoo into Heaven," "Where Potchikoo Goes Next," "Potchikoo's Detour," "Potchikoo Greets Josette," "Potchikoo Restored," "Potchikoo's Mean Twin," and "How Josette Takes Care of It."

The potato boy, Potchikoo, is a trickster and his narrative enters the mythic realm. The rape of his mother by the sun and other events and characteristics originate in sacred Ojibwa myth. Erdrich puts a new twist on this traditional tale, blending in the various cultural influences of Catholicism and current environment, raising contemporary ethical issues. Andrew Wiget discusses the moral significance of the trickster:

Because what we know is rooted in what we believe, Trickster tales, as Beidelman has noted, shift the burden of meaning from the cognitive sphere to the moral one. When the crux of interpretation is recognized as a dilemma, the interpretive stance toward the situation changes. Instead of asking, What is Truth in the matter?--an unanswerable question in a dilemma in which both horns can claim legitimacy--one must ask, What is right? and assess the tale on the basis of the Good. (94-95)

The apparent contradictions and intermingling of the concrete world with a mythic universe in Erdrich's rendering of trickster tales, therefore, lead to moral questions rather than issues of reality. Trickster's life beyond death and his returns to the natural world suggest endurance and survival (Catt 73). Through humor, trickster draws attention to inappropriate morals. Trickster humor also socializes the individual about bodily functions, removing the danger of embarrassment by placing the subject in a liminal realm. Absurd consequences result from immoral behavior. Potchikoo's object of humor and exposure is empowered institutions, particularly Western religions.

Erdrich immediately confronts the issues of believability as the narrative begins. An implausible premise is suggested: Potchikoo's father is the sun. The story then confirms the unbelievable. The reader/hearer is invited to disbelieve but continuing the story and direct address engages the audience, as if hearing the story told aloud.

You don't have to believe this, I'm not asking you to.

But Potchikoo claims that his father is the sun in heaven that shines down on us all.

There was a very pretty Chippewa girl working in a field once. She was digging potatoes for a farmer someplace around Pembina when suddenly the wind blew her dress up around her face and wrapped her apron so tightly around her arms that she couldn't move. She lay helplessly in the dust with her potato sack, this poor girl, and as she lay there she felt the sun shining down very steadily upon her.

Then she felt something else. You know what. I don't have to say it.

The natural outcome of this encounter was the birth of Potchikoo, a boy who looked "just like a potato." Trickster demonstrates that actions have consequences. The moral is verbalized: "'That's what she gets for playing loose in the potato fields,' they said."

In the "Potchikoo Marries" section, he takes a train to Minneapolis where he falls in love with a tobacco store wooden Indian, Josette, a wonderful play with Noble Savage stereotype. Potchikoo sets his beloved on fire, then drowns her, trying to extinguish her fire in a lake. Nevertheless, she is baptismally reborn and he marries her. This urban adventure to find a mate correlates the archetypal hero's adventure and return home. Potchikoo's

cultural ignorance of wooden incarnations and his lust for Josette, however, nearly lead to disaster.

Potchikoo gets old with the help of Josette and the social mores of the Catholic Church.

As a young man, Potchikoo sometimes embarrassed his wife by breaking wind during Holy Mass. It was for this reason that Josette whittled him a little plug out of ash wood and told him to put it in that place before he entered Saint Ann's church.

During a sermon on the Ascension, Potchikoo inflates, floats up in the cathedral, and explodes.

Holy Mass was canceled for a week so the church could be aired out, but to this day a faint scent still lingers and Potchikoo, sadly enough was shriveled by his sudden collapse and flight through the air. For when Josette picked him up to bring home, she found that he was now wrinkled and dry like an old man.

There are several morals in this episode: do not unnaturally suppress natural body functions, beware of taking religion too seriously or submitting to your spouse.

Potchikoo dies from infidelity in a metaphor of a heart attack. His soul continues, though. St. Peter does not let Potchikoo enter heaven because he is an Indian, so he finds Indian heaven. He could only find chokecherries and venison to eat. He

began wandering around and found hell where people were chained to old Sears Roebuck catalogues. He returns to Josette where in an excessive sexual episode "he found that his favorite part of himself was charred black, and thin as a burnt twig." He recovers by dipping himself in wax but then becomes so large that he must carry himself in a wheelbarrow. He has an escapade with a Mrs. B (perhaps an obscure allusion to lascivious Mr. B of Clarissa) that restores him to normal, and he returns to Josette.

Potchikoo has a bad twin who raises a ruckus. Potchikoo is jailed and the twin exposed. Josette tempts the twin with icons and appetites. He disappears and Josette saves the remains of Potchikoo in her purse.

The trickster cycle of Potchikoo warns against sexual excess, satirizes organized religion and popular culture, addresses the duality of good and evil, and gives power and knowledge to Josette. Erdrich, playing the trickster as author, connects the mythic and natural world with trains, radios, catalogues, churches, and tobacco stores.

The inclusion of these tales with poetry raises questions of genre, meaning, culture and language. Erdrich addresses these question from many angles. The personal poems are consistent with standard expectations of poetry, although incorporating a Native American point of view. The ritualistic poems include religious, Euroamerican, and Chippewa mythic expressions and questions. The narrative poems tell stories, create characters, and, finally, abandon the conventional structure of poetry for the straight narrative of Potchikoo. This obsfucation of customary poetry leads naturally to the condensed language of Erdrich's fiction.

Chapter 3

Crossing the Bridges: The North Dakota Novels

The novels published under Louise Erdrich's name are Love Medicine (1984), The Beet Queen (1986), and Tracks (1988),¹ and constitute three parts of a tetralogy with interrelated characters and themes. The fourth novel, The Bingo Palace, will be published in late 1993 or early 1994. These novels are written in collaboration with Erdrich's husband, Michael Dorris, although he is not credited. While Love Medicine and Tracks are overtly Chippewa in their content, themes, and characters, The Beet Queen is not. However, the interrelationship of the three novels demonstrates a communal approach with tribal values and rhetoric.

¹The following editions are used: Love Medicine (New York: Bantam, 1989); The Beet Queen (New York: Bantam Trade Edition, 1989); Tracks (New York: Perennial Library, 1989). All subsequent references will be to these editions and noted parenthetically in the text.

The collaboration between Erdrich and Dorris is well documented (see Bonetti, Bruchac, Coltelli, Huey, Unger, and Wong). Early in Erdrich's writing career Dorris suggested Erdrich submit a short story for competition. He also suggested the compilation, relationship, and revisions of previously published stories to create Love Medicine. The joint participation extends beyond mere suggestion to consensus on every word, thus incorporating Dorris as co-author. He describes the process:

Before either of us starts writing we talk out the beginning of a story--the shape of the characters, some of the idiosyncracies, and so forth. Then whoever is going to be the primary author of the piece will sit down in isolation, confront the blank page, and create some words that get passed back.

The other partner goes over them, makes comments about word changes and even about where the plot will go after this section--what's missing, or what possibilities are suggested by it. And then it goes back to the person who wrote it. . . . Eventually, in all the books, we agree upon all the words. (Huey 17)

This close work may be threatening to the American spirit of individualism and ownership.

Collaboration without credit may be especially offensive to feminist ideology in the case of Erdrich's uncredited work on Dorris's A Yellow Raft

in Blue Water, The Broken Cord, and Mourning Girl. However, it reflects a collective and tribal approach, where the good and the needs of the whole supersede those of the individual. The voice of the individual is not lost but enhanced through communal spirit and cooperation. This implication emerges in all the novels through co-authorship and through multiple narrators.

Tracks, The Beet Queen, and Love Medicine contain the complex development of family groups from North Dakota. According to the authors, the books actually should be read in reverse order of publication to understand chronological development and the complex motivations and backgrounds of primary characters (Schumacher 59). Tracks was published last but, according to Dorris, "was the first one to have the finished draft" (Coltelli 51). All three novels use the technique of multiple narrators, evidence of tribal community, the heritage of storytelling, and the more modern influence of William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying. All represent place as an ontological source. Time is mythic, often non-linear. Characters reflect the rhetoric of oral tradition. A trickster archetype

appears in all three novels. Each novel presents indications of the multicultural background of both Erdrich and Dorris, more obviously in Tracks and Love Medicine. The Beet Queen, however, is more complicated in evidences of a multicultural rhetoric and mediation of cultural values.

Tracks

The tragedy of cultural transformation, loss of religion, land, power, community, and identity, is central to Tracks. The story is told by alternating narrators, Nanapush and Pauline, concretizing the oral tradition in style and in print. Nanapush represents the traditional point of view and link to the past, while Pauline is a mixed blood mediator, mostly Indian by heritage and environment, white by choice, mixed in deed and thought. The action is designated to unfold from 1912 through 1924 but avoids linear time by mythically circling through Nanapush's memories and Pauline's ambitions for the future. Events, particularly those involving the mystical character Fleur, enter mythic time and place. The life giving source of the land is vital, and setting becomes more than ambiance, taking on

its own character and action. The loss of the land and the Matchimanito Lake, emblem of water and life, are irreversible. However, as the novel and its sequels demonstrate, the inimitable spirit of the characters and their culture reconcile crisis and survive.

The mere telling of stories by the principles, Nanapush and Pauline, in a published novel mediates, yet preserves, cultures. The community of the Anishinabe had already adapted to several hundred years of European contact. The novel begins with Nanapush, as narrator, recounting that history:

We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall. It was surprising there were so many of us left to die. For those who survived the spotted sickness from the south, our long flight west to Nadioussioux land where we signed the treaty, and then a wind from the east, bringing exile in a storm of government papers, what descended from the north in 1912 seemed impossible.

By then, we thought disaster must surely have spent its force, that disease must have claimed all of the Anishinabe that the earth could hold and bury.

But the earth is limitless and so is luck and so were our people once. (1)

These opening lines establish the major premises of the novel. In a simple rhetoric, Nanapush recounts the hardships and survival of his

tribe. The opening prose, comparing fallen lives to descending snowflakes enters a rhetoric more common to poetry with its condensation of language. The tragedy is evident, but not accusing or blaming. This gracefulness of language is the heritage of the oral tradition.

Nanapush also reveals that he will tell history from a privileged point of view. That privilege is not a position of political power, but one of experience and victimage. The reader is aware that his story is a re-telling and reinterpretation of history. The central importance of place is established by references to the cardinal directions and the earth itself. The tribal identity is naturally revealed as Anishinabe, the more traditional appellation, and as being inextricable with the earth. Interconnectedness with tribal identity and place is fundamental; it is an interweaving that subsumes material culture or external peculiarities.

Nanapush continues his story, told to Lulu, whom he calls "Granddaughter." This intergenerational aspect of storytelling preserves history and culture and functions as a reoralizing

performance. As Nanapush describes his actions in rescuing Fleur, his care of the bodies of her family, the violations of cultural codes mitigated by the circumstances of epidemic, climate, and police power of the Pukwan family, the specific and material culture is established and mediated.

Nanapush recounts his durability:

I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a pelt of more than two years' growth. I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake. I axed the last birch that was older than I . . . (2)

Nanapush will witness the last and expedient compromise to sell land belonging to the Pillagers to ensure continued endurance. "Pillager" is an ironic name in English, but in Chippewa is associated with "the bear, a symbol of strength and courage, and the marten, a symbol of singlemindedness" (Holt 155).

Nanapush's inability to intervene is not traitorous, but like many other acts of mediation, necessary to survival. He even joins the power structure, as tribal chair, in an attempt to

mitigate the effects of economic and social dominance. As Debra C. Holt observes:

Nanapush outlives his blood relatives because he can read two sets of tracks-- the ones left by animals in the woods and those left on paper. His ability to accept the new and the old, a Christian God and Indian spirits, guarantees his survival. (160)

Further, Nanapush can allow and even embrace the apparent incompatibility and discrepancy between cultures.

Pauline, on the other hand, delivers a rhetoric of madness. She emphasizes the inexplicable. She refers to her people as the "Chippewa," a more modern appellation than the traditional Anishinabe. She tends to interpret hysterically events and even distort her own participation in them. As a mixed blood, she wants to deny her Indian heritage, and so she leaves her family in order to live in the "white town" of Argus. She sees assimilation as key to her survival:

I wanted to be like my mother, who showed her half-white. I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian. That was because even as a child I saw that to hang back was to perish. I saw through the eyes of the world outside of us. I would not speak our language. (14)

Ironically, Pauline survives through her reliance on Native American traditions, and her awareness that "Power travels in bloodlines, handed out before birth" (31). In Argus, she can disappear into the background, becoming invisible like many minorities, allowing her to observe and narrate Fleur's story. Back among the Chippewa, however, as a mixed blood, she is isolated. Nanapush observes:

She was, to my mind, an unknown mixture of ingredients, like pale bannock that sagged or hardened. We never knew what to call her or what to think when she was around.
(38-39)

She is also "unnoticeable" in the Chippewa culture, but Nanapush ascribes that to her homeliness. Her efforts to become part of that community, despite her denials, depend on a tradition she knows well: storytelling. Pauline's recounting of events in Argus give her power and purge her of the horrific memory of Fleur's tragic rape and the deaths of the poker players, just as Nanapush's telling of events gives power of preservation to Lulu, love medicine to Eli, and the means of his own healing (46).

Pauline finally attempts to choose one culture over another by embracing the Catholic Church. In a complex development of questioning sacred beliefs in

diametric opposition and defining self through racially divided communities, Pauline denies her daughter, named Marie after the Virgin, and enters the convent. She is only admitted by sincerely denying her Indianness, after hearing the voice of God:

He said that I was not whom I had supposed. I was an orphan and my parents had died in grace, and also, despite my deceptive features, I was not one speck of Indian but wholly white. (135)

Pauline incorporates the mysticism of the lake deity, Missepeshu, with the Christian god who enjoys her self-mortification. Nevertheless, she continues to be involved with Nanapush, Fleur, and the Kashpaws. They manipulate and tease her, ignore her or speak only English to her, treating her "as they would a white" (145). Finally, Pauline bizarrely purifies herself of her lover, her demons, and her Indian self, in a baptism/near drowning. She transforms into Sister Leopolda.

Nanapush also survives, but by mediating his heritage. He reveals his name, an alteration of the Chippewa trickster Nanabozho, accepting the loss of power. He gives that name to Fleur's daughter, Lulu, falsely claiming paternity to appease the

Catholic priest. He acts outside conventions of the dominant culture, functioning as a trickster, with sexual adventure, retelling of a trickster tale to humiliate pious Pauline, and "pointed jokes" (Catt 78-79). He plays along with Father Damien, stealing wire from the piano keys in extreme registers the priest avoids, and offers scandalous, spurious confessions. However, in the final episode of the novel, where Nanapush relates the trickery and loss of land, he sees the value of Father Damien's warnings:

He was right in that I should have tried to grasp the new way of wielding influence, this method of leading others with a pen and piece of paper. (209)

Nanapush wraps up the loose ends of the plot, summarizing the major themes. He blesses Fleur's departure, recognizing her inability to remain with the Kashpaws on a land that was not hers by title or natural rights. He runs for tribal chair and wins. He retrieves Lulu from the government school on the premise of his fatherhood, proved by the spurious birth documents. Having learned the power of written language in negotiating survival, he concludes the novel in a complex layering of

storytelling, metaphor, and hope. He addresses the continuance of his family, not by blood lineage but by spirit and necessity:

Your grin was bold as your mother's, white with anger that vanished when you saw us waiting. You went up on your toes, and tried to walk, prim as you'd been taught. Halfway across, you could not contain yourself and sprang forward. Lulu. We gave against your rush like creaking oaks, held on, braced ourselves together in the fierce dry wind. (226)

Injustice is mitigated in the grace of love and language. Hope rests in children and transformation. The dry wind forsakes the earth element of Tracks and foreshadows the element of air in The Beet Queen.

Both Pauline and Nanapush, as narrators, rhetorically reveal their compromises in language and action. Fleur, as victim, is the most traditional and least adaptive of the characters. She is never given a voice of her own, rather is interpreted by the dichotomous Pauline and Nanapush. Pauline abdicates her traditional roots and associations with vengeful violence. Nanapush, as a transforming trickster, ritualizes oppression through language and action, thus avoiding the reciprocal violence that consumes Pauline. By

ensuring the survival and mediation of traditional culture, he is forced into a world of multiculturalism.

The Beet Queen

In the second novel of the trilogy, Erdrich continues themes of isolation and reconciliation. Setting and characters are drawn primarily from dominant America, Erdrich's Euroamerican heritage. Satire and social criticism question basic values of individualism, progress, and normalcy, offering an alternative stability derived from multicultural traditions. Significance of place, communal values, mythic time, spirituality, and trickster humor, all manifest in rhetoric of oral tradition, reveal The Beet Queen as a Native American novel mediating with Euroamerican culture. Additionally, individual characters exhibit the subtle interplays of racism and multicultural adaptation.

The scene moves from the tribal lands of Tracks to the small town of Argus, North Dakota. Most of the characters--Mary Adare, her brother Karl, Sita Kozka, and Wallace Pfef--are Euroamericans. Celestine James, her half-brother Russell Kashpaw,

and daughter, Dot Adare, are mixed blood Chippewas. Russell, Eli Kashpaw, Fleur Pillager, and Pauline Puyat, now Sister Leopolda, are carried over from Tracks, although Eli, Fleur, and Pauline have only minor roles.

The novel begins with a description of the locale:

Long before they planted beets in Argus and built the highways, there was a railroad. Along the track, which crossed the Dakota--Minnesota border and stretched on to Minneapolis, everything that made the town arrived. All that diminished the town departed by that route, too. (1)

Like its Greek counterpart, Argos, the town contains life-giving elements central to each character and his/her personality. Argos is inextricable with Jason in preindustrial Greek sacred stories. Likewise, Argus is a source of identification and a repository of values that each character seeks or rejects. According to Mary Adare, the town has its own poetic association and is named for its Indian predecessors (278).

Like cultures, the land transforms. The images of adaptability include the implied transfer from Native American to Euroamerican and conversions from railway to highway and grain production to sugar

beets, providing an economic means for people to continue on the land. The emphasis on transportation metaphors suggests transition and connection between destinations. Because the railroad is fixed, basic assumptions about progress are questioned. When the butcher shop suffers because of the infusion of supermarkets, values of personal service are lost in conveniences gained.

Mary seeks a home and stability in Argus with her aunt and uncle. Karl, unable to settle, only passes through the town. Sita repudiates her home town, first in a quest for cosmopolitan life, then in life in the symbolic outskirts. Celestine lives in Argus, apart from the reservation and traditional Chippewa culture as an act of mediation and survival.

The Beet Queen continues Erdrich's style of multiple narrators. Mary, Sita, Celestine, Wallace, and, in the final chapter, Dot each tell their own stories. Each chapter is headed by a first person narration, sometimes with up to three different characters telling the story in individual sections, and, then, concluded with an omniscient narration of events the characters themselves cannot report.

Karl and Russell, as powerless characters, have their sections told by this non-intrusive third person narrator. Dot, who has only one chapter of narration, concludes the novel in first person voice.

This narrative technique, begun in the earlier published Love Medicine, functions in several ways. Although multiple narration is reminiscent of William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying, the effect is not modernistic Faulknerian alienation. Varied interpretations unify a community of diversity rather than isolate individuals. The traditional novelistic structures of protagonist and plot development are usurped in favor of episodic renderings, overlapped accounts, and equalized treatment of the characters, thus establishing a *communitas*.

Additionally, all major characters are off-center: Russell and Celestine are marked by race, Sita is psychotic, Mary is obsessed with spiritualism and visually distinguished by her squat physique, Wallace is a closet homosexual, Karl is bisexual. Mary, Karl, and Jude Miller are abandoned children, and Russell is physically impaired.

Because no adult character is "normal" and no stable family structure exists, the bounds of acceptability are extended to the whole community, creating an environment of diversity. Such an atmosphere allows the characters to bind to one another despite traditional prejudices and barriers and is personified by their individual interest in Dot.

In addition to creating community through tolerating differences, the tribal nature of the novel is solidified through ritual. Informal social rituals rather than ceremonial or sacred rites unify the characters. Celestine, Mary, and Wallace join in communal meals, the school pageant, and the Beet Festival. Russell, Celestine, and Mary unite in food preparation to rescue Chez Sita on its opening night. Mary and Celestine always travel with a eucharistic offering of food, usually cake and sausage. Sita rejects their edibles and their community, refusing to participate even in mundane customs. The transference of ritualization from a divine connotation to social interaction represent Euroamerican division of sacred and profane, unlike Native American holistic unification where all aspects of life and communal interaction are sacred.

Sita and Karl, whose self-interests supersede the considerations and needs of their community, isolate themselves, physically and spiritually. Both are consumed with ownership of commodities and people, unaware of the freedom to self in allowing the "other" to independently exist.

The narrative structure itself creates a communal audience. The nature of storytelling as an oral tradition implies a community of tellers and listeners. Because major events have ritualized joint participation--the pageant, the birthday party, the restaurant opening, the parade--they unify the characters. However, individuality is maintained in the communal structure through varying interpretations of events and narrative voices.

The overlapping narrative voices and apparent lack of progression in each character demonstrate mythic, non-linear time. As Paula Gunn Allen observes, referring to the fiction of N. Scott Momaday (mixed blood Kiowa) and James Welch (Blackfeet-Gros Ventre):

Their novels weave in and out of past, present, and future, incorporating vision and dream into the action as the story move toward its inevitable conclusion.
(94)

She also notes:

The traditional concept of time is of timelessness, as the concept of space is of multidimensionality. In the ceremonial world the tribes inhabit, time and space are mythic. (147)

These characteristics are prominent in both the Euroamerican and mixed blood characters of The Beet Queen. The events take the reader through linear time, but the individuality and interpretation of incidents by the varying narrators create a circling or mythic time. Likewise, no character experiences a life-changing epiphany but naturally matures in his or her ability to confront human existence. Character's basic personalities remain immutable. Their histories, the consuming present, and hopes for the future focus on Dot, epitomized in the ritual recreation of her grandmother's airplane escape.

During the episode in which Celestine aligns herself in childhood friendship to Mary, switching from Sita, a singular moment establishes Sita's vanity, mental instability, and histrionics, Mary's pragmatism, and Celestine's cultural disappearing. In Sita's voice:

What the breeze made me do next was almost frightening. Something happened, I turned in a slow circle. I tossed my hands out and wave them. I swayed as if I heard music from below. Quicker, and then wilder, I lifted my feet. I began to tap them down, and then I was dancing on their graves. (35)

In Mary's voice:

How long was Sita going to shimmy there, I wondered, with her shirt off and thunderclouds lowering? I heard Celestine walk into the kitchen below and bang the oven door open, so I came down. . . . She never looked up. But she knew I was there, and she knew that I'd been up on the second floor, watching Sita. I know that she knew because she hardly glanced up when I spoke. (35)

This episode is one of many in which a singular action is open to a variety of meanings. The separate narrations give new life to a singular instant, placing the unfolding of events outside linear structure into a mythical realm.

Sita, begging for attention, fails to capture and own the imagination of her friend, Celestine, or her cousin, Mary. She ceremonially dances, desperately trying to recapture the relationship. Her loss parallels Mary and Karl's loss of their father, mother and baby brother, ritually re-enacting inevitable personal sacrifice. Sita is

displaced from her family and her friend, and, later, her whole community.

Mary's version of the scene identifies Sita's self-exploitation, even in prepubescent sexuality. Her narrative overlapping isolates the dancing moment but, later, also reveals Sita's consequences at home with her parents. Circling and overlapping, in this instance and other episodes, removes the linear imperative from the plot. Mary's telling of Celestine's emotional removal from the situation leaves the reader to guess at Celestine's true feelings but is also an indicator of cultural mediation, as she becomes invisible to the struggle between the two cousins.

Perhaps the most notable event of narrative overlap and multiple interpretation is Mary's headlong crash into the ice. She creates an imprint that she decodes as her brother Karl, the nuns see as the face of Christ, and Celestine sees only as a "smashed spot." The multiple truths of the imprint are metonymic of the multiple cultures. The "miracle" is a mythic moment, shaping Mary's personality with a false predisposition to gifts of spirituality, securing her place in society apart

from her cousin Sita, and confirming Celestine's isolation from the dominant cultural codes.

These three characters maintain their basic personalities and cultural behavior throughout their adult lives. Their reunion in Part Four of the novel reveals that Sita has become chemically dependent, Celestine grounded in reality, and Mary practical in her familial devotion and her decision to take Sita's corpse to Argus. Karl and Wallace also retain their basic personalities. This lack of character development does not mean they are not fully rounded persons, but discloses a mythic, non-linear approach to human existence. Dream and vision are interwoven into the story both as satire and as reality, adding humor, mysticism, and spirituality to mythic nature of the novel. The Euroamerican characters do not comprehend sacredness in the same manner as the Chippewas mixed bloods.

Sita appears to trifle with spirituality. She attends the ordination to the priesthood of her lost cousin, Jude Miller, but her obsession with his legitimacy thwarts any religious response. When Karl visits Sita and sinks into the grass, the moment is not metaphysical, despite her ritualistic

invocations of *mea culpa*, but evidence of her disintegrating mind. Her final visions are drug induced. Like all other aspects of her life, her self preoccupation interferes with real humanity or spiritual awareness.

Mary's crash into the ice precipitates a spiritual vision that she attempts to recover the rest of her life. The Church interprets the image in the ice as a holy manifestation: "Christ's Dying Passion . . . Christ's face formed in the ice as surely as on Veronica's veil" (40). Mary believes that the image, although melting in the spring, is the face of her brother, Karl, and has assumed a deified significance:

The face of Karl, or Christ dispersed into little rivulets that ran all through the town. Echoing in gutters, disappearing, swelling through culverts and collecting in basements, he made himself impossibly everywhere and nowhere all at once sot the all spring before the town baked hard, before the drought began, I felt his presence in the whispering and sighing of the streams. (40-41)

Not only does the rhetoric of this passage elevate familial bonds to the divine, through allusion to the nature of God, but it also acknowledges life in the earth itself. Mary, however, never recovers her

miracle moment. She aspires to the supernatural with tarot cards and yarrow sticks, deciphered with help from a mail-order manual, that fall off the hood of her truck. She wears turbans, has a Ouija board, and reads egg yolks.

Celestine, ever the realist, scoffs at Mary's attempts at divination. During a discussion of the afterlife, she observes:

[Mary] is being mental again, going off to flights of fantasy. . . . It is always my job to bring her back. . . . for a while that is enough of her boolah about the dead. (263)

Nevertheless, Celestine and her brother Russell have a spirituality that eludes the other characters. Their sensitivity to sacred beliefs not openly expressed demonstrates their cultural mediation. Celestine's motherhood is purifying, filling her with vision and hope:

Common objects and events seemed slightly strange, as if she were encountering them in the clarity of a strong dream. It was Dot's presence, her heavy sweetness, the milk of Celestine's own body on her breath, the soft odor of her hair, her glorious wealth of pink and lavender skin, that changed the cast of Celestine's daily world. (175)

In a rhetoric reminiscent of Erdrich's poems of motherhood, the physicality of the moment becomes transcendent.

Celestine keeps a realistic understanding of seeming mystical circumstances, particularly Mary's odd endeavors. However, the final unification of the female friends and family is motivated by a visionary dream. After discounting Mary's "mysterious claims," Celestine says:

But then, that night, something happens
that is unlike me. I have a dream. . . .
Whatever it is, the dream is more real
than life to me. (264-265)

She dreams that Sita is ill and is asking for help. Mary's eager response and Celestine's assistance set in motion the final episodes of the novel.

Celestine also rescues Russell from the fishing shack. She goes there without explanation or motivation, finding Russell incapacitated by a stroke. The only indication that she knew to come is from Russell's willing her there: "She was there when he felt the first tightening in his chest" (157).

Russell is also visionary. In a section titled "Most Decorated Hero," Russell is the star

attraction of the Beet Festival Parade. Immobile, he rides in a wheelchair, subject to the ridicule of the crowd. He sees, in the crowd, his dead sister, Isabel. She beckons him to follow her down "the road that the old-time Chippewas talked about, the four-day road, the road of death." He imagines himself, dead, in the parade:

It struck him as so funny that the town he'd lived in and the members of the American Legion were solemnly saluting a dead Indian, that he started to shake with laughter.

The damn thing was that he laughed too hard, fell off the road, opened up his eyes before he'd gone past the point of no return, and found himself only at the end of the parade. (300)

Russell's vision allows him to see his future. Reality and humor keep him in the mortal world. His supernatural vision and his interruption of it illustrate trickster humor, confirming the mythical nature of the novel.

In her dissertation, New Tribal Forms: Community in Louise Erdrich's Fiction (Tufts University, 1991), Pauline Groetz Woodward suggests that the trickster disposition of The Beet Queen conforms to Gerald Vizenor's definitions of narrative chance:

The spirit of trickster pervades The Beet Queen in its comic world view, chorus of narrative voices, and light-as-air concept of family as community. In a comic view of the world chance is both liberation force and invitation to change or to adapt. Gerald Vizenor connects the spirit of the trickster to chance in its possibilities of release:

Freedom is a sign, and the trickster is chance and freedom in a comic sigh; comic freedom is a 'doing,' not an essence, not a museum being, not an aesthetic presence. The trickster as a semiotic sign is imagined in narrative voices, a communal rein to the unconscious which is comic liberation. ("A Postmodern Introduction," Narrative Chance 13)

The spirit of trickster inhabits The Beet Queen, surfacing in the tension of lives freed by chance. (152)

Woodward then catalogues the chance occurrences in the lives of the characters, and the comic tone of the novel. While Vizenor's understanding of the comic holotrope of trickster is accurate, further examination of the moral consequences and the cultural play of trickster is necessary to understand the pervasive trickster spirit of the novel.

Fundamentally, in addressing multicultural audiences, from a mixed blood world view, the author(s) are playing a trickster role with survival humor. Paul Lauter observes:

The writer, thus addressing multiple audiences, emerges as trickster and clown, deferential and sweet even as she spins away with a grotesque gesture of . . . is it triumph? defiance? invitation? Survival is serious business that, it may be, cannot be taken all too seriously.
(31)

The characters of The Beet Queen are conventional grotesques, revealing the influence of Flannery O'Connor and her characterization of "man forced to meet the extremes of his own nature" (Holman 220). Wallace and Karl confront their sexual desires, Sita has to meet her obsessive consuming of people and commodities; Mary must bear her loneliness, Celestine her mixed status, and Dot must address her place in the mixed community that cares for her.

In addition to the grotesque and its accompanying satire, the ethical implications of trickster are explained by Andrew Wiget and previously discussed with the Potchikoo tales of Erdrich's poetry. The trickster serves a moral function, through comedy, through extremities of behavior, satirizing both mainstream and marginal cultures, destroying hierarchy and creating

communitas.² Trickster humor also mediates tragedy and comedy in the blackness of survival humor. The multiple interpretations or epistemological gliding through events in the novel demonstrate the liminality and cultural mediation of the trickster.

The novel is full of devastating occurrences, but most take a dark comic or trickster turn. In the opening chapter, Mr. Ober, the keeper of Mary's mother, Adelaide, and probable father of the children, is smothered in a "grain-loading accident" (6). In real life and Euroamerican cosmology, the event is catastrophic, as the Adares lose their home and their means of support. As a transitional character, Mr. Ober mediates both extremes of his life: a public and private family, apparent wealth and authentic debt. However, if Mr. Ober were a trickster, his death would be ironic, comic, a

²For an summary of trickster see Barbara Babcock-Abrams, "'A Tolerated Margin of Mess,': The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered." Journal of the Folklore Institute, 11.3 (1975), 147-86; Carl G. Jung, "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure," in Symposium on the Whole: A Range of Discourse Toward an Ethnopoetics, eds. Jerome Rothenberg and Diane Rothenberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983): 206-16; and Suzanne Lundquist, Trickster: A Transformation Archetype (New York: Mellon Research University Press, 1991).

natural consequence of his overindulgence in the harvests of life, intersecting with chance. The moral implications caution against illicit affairs, self-gratification as Mr. Ober reaps what he has sown, literally and figuratively.

If a worldview is grounded in trickster tales, like the Potchikoo stories, the absurdity of the circumstances of Mr. Ober's death are obviously comic. If a worldview is grounded in original sin, the repercussions are tragic. However, as plot situations unfold, increasing in grotesqueness and absurdity, the trickster mode overrides solemn anguish or modernistic angst.

Adelaide's abandonment of her children is social calamity. When she flies away with The Great Omar, verbally similar to "Ober," Mary and Karl should be devastated. Nevertheless, Mary, as narrator, responds with her characteristic sensibility:

Satisfaction. It surprised me, but that was the first thing I felt after Adelaide flew. For once she had played no favorites between Karl and me, but left us both. (13)

This unanticipated emotion shocks and is humorous in its incongruity.

In the final air escape of the novel, the comic circling is complete. Dot participates in her own enshrining as Queen Wallacette in the skywriting airplane:

The plane wiggles, shudders, spins over like a carnival rocket. I feel too light, unconnected. I sit up and open my mouth, shriek at [the pilot] to take me back down. He refuses. He's got to write my name. My whole long awful name. Ten letters. (336)

Dot defies social expectations, avoiding the coronation on the ground while ironically exalting it in the sky. She messes up the ceremony and demonstrates its vacuity while directing herself to reconciliation. Her antics are a "functional steam valve" (Babcock-Abrams 183), relieving the ponderous impact of Sita's death. Dot is the link to the future. Despite her rebellion, somehow, she is aware of her connections and returns to her circle of support.

By this point in the story, numerous trickster episodes predict this comic completion. The reader has experienced the miracle of the ice, Karl's acrobatics, the frantic birth of Dot and her transforming name from Wallacette, the food poisoning in the restaurant, Dot's wheelchair

adventure, the naughty box, the beaming of the donkey in the pageant, the nuts and bolts jell-o salad, the spinning cake, Sita's miraculous recovery of her voice, the near dead Indian on parade, and the really dead Sita on parade. Each of these episodes unite the community of characters by destroying hierarchy and expectations. They each have a common sense lesson. They all exemplify the persistence of the human spirit.

Each of the main characters mediates their cultural circumstances in order to survive. Mary makes herself indispensable to her Aunt and Uncle and the surrounding community. She forsakes social expectations, becoming a successful business woman, loyally devoting herself to Celestine and, later, Dot. She is impervious to social norms, dressing exotically, behaving bizarrely. Her life is a duality of self-sufficiency and dependence.

Wallace is the most successful businessman in Argus. He motivates the change in crop that ensures the survival of the community. His secret desires are disguised by his social position. He mediates in Mary's and Celestine's struggle for Dot's

devotion. His public and private discrepancies require continually adapting his behavior.

Russell's cultural mediation allows him to be paraded in the community to which he did not belong. He served the United States, defending a Constitution that had historically not protected the rights of his people. As a group, Native Americans have served in the Armed Forces, even before they were granted citizenship in this country. Their vested interest is defending the "ideal" of this country, which should protect their privileged relationship with the United States government. Russell's physical scars symbolize the spiritual scarring from social injustices. Celestine observes of her brother:

People say he is one Indian who won't go downhill in life but have success, and he does, later, depending on how you look at it. (44)

Russell's place in the social structure of Argus, as "Most Decorated Hero," should invite basic questions about the historical and political roles of Native Americans. Erdrich's graceful rhetoric may be too subtle. Russell's warrior success is culturally defined by his Army war medals, a

transference of material culture from historic emblems of war booty to modern symbols. His human success is defined by his survival, with grace and humor.

Sita, who struggles to conform and control rather than reconcile, perishes wholly, in body and spirit. She cannot adapt without possession. Celestine's racial difference does not disturb Sita, because Sita never has to acknowledge it. She believes she consumes Celestine: "But more than anything else, I like Celestine because she was mine. She belonged to me" (34). Sita fails to acknowledge human existence apart from herself. Ironically, she cannot possess another, and Celestine maintains strict control over what she is willing to offer.

Celestine survives in a racially mixed town by withholding the most private parts of herself. She disappears into the dominant culture, avoiding the hurt of racism. She will not look at Mary when her allegiance switches. When she confronts her lover, Karl, she withdraws:

But because he doesn't understand the first thing about me, he draws blank.

There is nothing to read on my face.
(134)

Celestine's actions in the novel do not fill the romantic expectations of the Noble Savage because she appears to integrate and function in Argus society rather than exploiting her exoticism or fiercely responding to her circumstances. While maintaining ties to the reservation and her family, she behaves in the dominant culture as she must. She and Russell resent Sita's racism and dominance (44), yet she responds to the spiritual imperative to help Sita. Her language is the most poetic of all the characters, reflecting the rhetoric of oral tradition. In a rare moment of transparency she says:

I have a strange thought that everything a person ever touched should be buried along with them, because things surviving people does not make sense. As [Mary] goes on and on about invisible gravities, I see all of use sucked headlong through space. I see us flying in a great wind of our own rubber mats and hairbrushes until we are swallowed up, with fearful swiftness, and disappear . . . I'm not even angry when Mary reads my thoughts again and says how the Indian burial mounds this town is named for contain the things that each Indian used in their lives. People have found stone grinders, hunting arrows, and jewelry of colored bones.

So I think it's no use. Even buried, our things survive. (278)

Juxtaposition of common objects with the eternities of space allow entrance into the cosmology of Celestine. Even physical artifacts have an animation and significance in conjunction with a living universe. Her awareness of history and endurance present a unique point of view. She tolerates Mary's invasion of her private thoughts because of her affection for Mary. Celestine's narrative sections of the novel allow understanding of diversity while celebrating a common essence of humanity.

Celestine's perseverance culminates in her intimacy with Dot. In the final episode of the novel, mother and daughter are reconciled. Dot is balanced, figuratively and literally by her mother's arm. Dot has inherited and been influenced by her mother's strength, as noted in the final paragraphs of the novel:

I want to lean into her the way wheat leans into wind. . . . the wind comes. It flows through the screens, slams doors, fills the curtains like sails, floods the dark house with the smell of dirt and water, the smell of rain.

I breathe it in, and I think of her lying in the next room, her covers thrown back too, eyes wide open, waiting. (338)

Poetic imagery transcends novelistic narrative. The oral rhetoric is natural to the Native American voice. The flood images lead Dot, and the reader, to the next novel, Love Medicine, where water is the primary element.

The ingredients of The Beet Queen appear in earlier published poems and short stories. An examination of the earlier publications demonstrates Erdrich's refining of characters and language while basic ideas remain intact. The physical details of characters and scene are similar to "The Butcher's Wife" cycle of poems, particularly Mary Kröger and Mary Adare in the butcher shop. Although some published sections, such as "The Beet Queen" in The Paris Review,³ remain essentially the same as the novel, others undergo radical changes. Some names are altered, implying refining of characters. In "The Little Book,"⁴ Karl's last name is not "Adare," but "Lavelle." In "Mister Argus,"⁵ and "The Air

³Louise Erdrich, "The Beet Queen" The Paris Review 27 (Spring 1985):10-26.

⁴Louise Erdrich, "The Little Book," Formations (Spring 1985): 1-6.

⁵Louise Erdrich, "Mister Argus," The Georgia Review (Summer 1985): 379-90.

Seeder,"⁶ Wallace Pfef is "Demeray Pfef," a more feminine name. In "Knives,"⁷ Fritzie Kozka is "Mary Herder," suggesting the carryover of Mary Kröger.

Celestine James's last name in "Destiny,"⁸ is "Duval," and more drastically, Sita's character is named "Adele," and she is mother to Wallacette. Celestine is mother-in-law to Adele/Sita. "Destiny" contains the seeds of the novel, with basic character traits remaining intact, although relationships change. The removal of the mother-in-law relationship allows for suspension of natural tensions, tribal taboos, and creation of a more intricate community around Wallacette/Dot. Episodes at the Poopdeck restaurant, of the Jell-o radish salad, and of the donkey at the pageant are in this story, but expanded in the novel.

⁶Louise Erdrich, "The Air Seeder," Antaeus (Fall 1985): 212-216.

⁷Louise Erdrich, "Knives," Chicago Magazine (August 1986) 109-111, 127.

⁸Louise Erdrich, "Destiny," The Atlantic Monthly (January 1985): 64-69.

Missing from the novel is a story of Dot's adolescent crisis, "The Dress."⁹ Celestine has only enough money for Dot's school dresses, and Dot wants a baseball mitt. Dot finds a catalogue bargain--grab bag dresses for one dollar each. She figures she can buy enough dresses for school and have her baseball glove, as well. The dresses come, one by one. They are hideous and are all exactly alike. Her schoolmates form a money pool, betting on the date when Dot will wear a different dress. Dot conspires with a schoolmate to win and split the pool. He betrays her.

Dot of the story is consistent with Dot of the novel in her aggressive defiance of peer influence. However, the resolution of the story leaves Dot betrayed and bewildered by her classmate. Dot of the novel may not have her way in everything, but she does not place her fortune in the hands of another.

The most notable published criticism of The Beet Queen includes favorable reviews by novelists Martin Cruz Smith, Anne Tyler, and Russell Banks.

⁹Louise Erdrich, "The Dress," Mother Jones 15 (July/August 1990): 50-56.

Smith says, "Mary Adare's grip is so strong that it could drive the blood from Hemingway's hand" (10). Tyler calls The Beet Queen "a perfect--and perfectly wonderful--novel" (4D). Banks notes the tribal paradox:

The chapters are alternately narrated by each of the main characters in a voice that belongs simultaneously to the character and to an impersonal, overseeing consciousness, so that the voices seem to blend, as in a chorus, without ever losing their remarkable individuality. (462)

Some of the sharpest criticism of the novel comes from prominent Native American scholars Louis Owens (Choctaw-Cherokee) and Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna). Owens observes in Western American Literature:

[I]t is a strangely painless novel, rising to a dark chuckle at times but evoking for the most part nothing stronger than a kind of gentle admiration for the way people simply keep going on--as well as intense admiration for the author as stylist. The excruciating quest for an Indian identity in late twentieth century America that haunts other fiction and poetry by Indian writers is simply not here. (55)

Silko is more vitriolic in her lengthy review, originally published in Impact/Albuquerque Journal and reprinted in Studies in American Indian Literatures. She categorizes The Beet Queen as a

self-referential, individualistic, postmodern novel, incapable of tribal knowledge. Silko assumes that Mary and Karl are part Indian, without any evidence other than physical appearance, then complains that they do not act like Indians. She criticizes Erdrich's lack of social awareness as motivation in a racially mixed town. She points out that Erdrich is half-Indian, but neglects her own quantum degree of one-eighth Laguna mixed blood. Her concluding paragraph demonstrates her tone and attitude:

The Beet Queen is a strange artifact, an eloquent example of the political climate in 1986. It belongs on the shelf next to the latest report from the United States Civil Right Commission, which says black men have made tremendous gains in employment and salary. This is the same shelf that holds the Collected Thoughts of Edwin Meese on First Amendment Rights and Grimm's Fairy Tales. (SAIL 184)

Silko's political agenda and criticism of Erdrich demonstrate the multicultural diversity among Native Americans, themselves.

Both Owen and Silko in their criticisms of The Beet Queen expose the complications of modern Native American issues. They both seem to want more suffering and outrage rather than grace and reconciliation. A close scrutiny of The Beet Queen

reveals that it is informed by tribal rhetoric and communal patterns. Celestine, as the primary Chippewa character, must negotiate cultures as must many urban Native Americans. Her Indian identity may not work for Owens, but it is appropriate for her. Additionally, Chippewa sensibilities are distinct from Choctaw, Cherokee, or Laguna.

Susan Pérez Castillo offers a detailed analysis of Silko's criticisms.¹⁰ Although Castillo tries to frame the conflict in terms of post-structuralist theory, she ultimately calls Silko's attack "misunderstandings related to a limited concept of ethnicity and an essentialist, logocentric view of referentiality" (288), and justifies Erdrich by referring to the Indianness of Tracks. She does not adequately address an Indian factor in The Beet Queen.

Gerald Vizenor, in the Preface to Narrative Chance, offers a different interpretation of the controversy:

¹⁰Susan Pérez Castillo, "Postmodernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko-Erdrich Controversy," The Massachusetts Review 32 (Summer 1991): 285-94.

Leslie Marmon Silko narrowed the focus of postmodern criticism; she used the word postmodern to mean separation from communal experience . . . The postmodern condition, however, is not literature on trial, but a liberation of tribal stories. Silko is precise in one sense, that postmodern attention would "set language free," but she misleads the reader by saying that post modern "writing reflects the isolation and alienation of the individual who shares nothing in common with other human being but language and its hygienic grammatical mechanisms." Erdrich is a polished writer and she could be called hygienic, an unusual postmodern metaphor on grammar, but not in the sense that is implied in the review. One definition of hygiene is the promotion of health. Modernism is much more mechanical and institutional; postmodern is a situational pattern, not a historical template; an erudite riposte to tribal representations, not a disguise or formal grammar. . . . The postmodern pose is a noetic mediation that denies historicism and representation, in particular it denies the kitschy speculation on the basic truth. (xii)

Vizenor gracefully acknowledges Silko's concerns while mitigating her accusations. He also acknowledges Erdrich's literary gifts and her cultural mediation as a presenter of Native American cultures.

Love Medicine

Erdrich expands the theme of healing and reconciliation begun in the poem "Love Medicine," in

her novel of the same title, a tale of modern life on the reservation. The characters are modern Chippewa who mediate their traditional and historical backgrounds with the challenges and cultural images of the modern world.

The Chippewa framework of Love Medicine is the object of many critical articles¹¹ addressing Native American values discussed above in the context of Tracks and The Beet Queen. Little has been published about how these values are adapted in the modern world of mediated cultures or the effect of Euroamerican reconciliations that allow multiculturalism while rejecting complete assimilation.

¹¹See the following: Nora Barry and Mary Prescott, "The Triumph of the Brave: Love Medicine's Holistic Vision," Critique 30 (Winter 1989): 123-38; Louise Flavin, "Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine: Loving Over Time and Distance," Critique 31 (Fall 1989): 55-64; Elizabeth I. Hanson, Forever There: Race and Gender in Contemporary Native American Fiction, American University Studies, Series XXIV, American Literature, Vol. 11 (New York: Peter Lang, 1989); James McKenzie, "Lipsha's Good Road Home: The Revival of Chippewa Culture in Love Medicine," American Indian Culture and Research Journal 10.3 (1986): 53-63; Lydia Agnes Schultz, "Fragments and Ojibwe Stories: Narrative Strategies in Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine," College Literature 18 (Oct. 1991): 80-95.

The novel begins with the journey of June Morrissey Kashpaw, a woman who has lost her way in the world and is trying to get home to the reservation. Although June dies by page six, her spirit inhabits the novel, and the other characters are healed by finding and telling of their love for her. Again, in the tribal tradition of storytelling and orality, various characters and an omniscient, non-intrusive narrator report the novel. It begins:

The morning before Easter Sunday, June Kashpaw was walking down the clogged main street of oil boomtown Williston, North Dakota, killing time before the noon bus arrived that would take her home. She was a long-legged Chippewa woman, aged hard in every way except how she moved. (1)

The precise references to time--day, hour and its death--seem estranged from mythical and circular time, symbolic of June's assimilation into the dominant culture. However, the presentation of the chapters of the novel moves forward and backward in time, with Erdrich's characteristic narrative overlapping. The reader could begin the novel at any chapter, and the final paragraphs compel the return to the opening.

June's quest to return home is a thwarted effort to return to those tribal values. Her tribal

affiliation is revealed naturally to contrast her history to her more recent circumstances. The description poetically encapsulates the conflicting forces of her life. The Easter reference alludes to her resurrective existence as the many characters of the novel reconcile their relationship with her and their own conflicts (Barry and Prescott 130-31).

The large cast of characters include Lulu, Eli, Nector, Marie, and Sister Leopolda from Tracks and Dot and Eli from The Beet Queen. A new generation of children and grandchildren validate the mediating choices made in Tracks. These characters must face their own mediating cultural choices in an increasingly complex universe.

Lulu Nanapush Lamartine continues the sacred trickster tradition of her spiritual father, Nanapush, from Tracks. She flaunts convention, bearing eight sons by different fathers:

The three oldest were Nanapushes. The next oldest were Morrisseys who took the name Lamartine, and then there were more assorted younger Lamartines who didn't look like one another, either. (76)

Her excesses bring about disaster, the burning of her home, a seemingly unstable life with many sorrows. Nevertheless, in her pluralistic universe,

intemperances also invoke justice. The tribe compensates her for her house after she threatens to name the fathers of her sons.

Her trickster legacy of sexual indiscretion is continued by her sons. Illegitimacy is mitigated by her guiding her grandson, Lipsha Morrissey, to his realization about himself:

You never knew who you were. That's one reason why I told you. I thought it was a knowledge that could make or break you.
(245)

As with trickster, the sin or moral infraction is not in doing but in not knowing. Trickster's outrageous behavior establishes a moral responsibility of accepting consequences for one's behavior.

Lulu passes the trickster lineage on to her son, Gerry, a fictional recreation of imprisoned activist Leonard Peltier (mixed blood Turtle Mountain Chippewa-Sioux),¹² who can mystically disappear "like a rabbit," eluding pursuing authorities. The rabbit is an incarnation of trickster (Catt 76). Gerry is playful and

¹²See Peter Matthiessen, In the Spirit of Crazy Horse (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991).

legendary, the inspiration to storytelling and songs. In a discussion of the trickster archetype, Catherine Catt observes Gerry's transforming power:

Gerry Nanapush is a model for survival and power--much as Trickster is; he adapts to any circumstance, changing form if necessary. (77)

Although Gerry may be the most obvious transforming character, each must adjust and adapt.

Some of the adaptations include embracing the assimilating culture. King Kashpaw and Beverly Lamartine seem completely integrated into mainstream America. Gerry Nanapush derides King as an apple, "red on the outside white on the inside" (259). These cultural accommodations are costly. A simple reading would construe King and Beverly in the rhetoric of the other characters who condemn them. Their isolation from the tribal community is tragic, spiritually deadening. Despite their vacuous lives, they bear the weight of race and the hope of endurance. That survival cannot occur in linear fashion, moving forward or backward by seeking or rejecting a traditional culture that no longer exists in pristine form, but in finding their own human capacities in current circumstances. Beverly

realizes he cannot take his biological son, Henry Lamartine, Jr., from Lulu, but he embraces a mythic moment, through sexual intimacy. Somehow, this moment is redemptive, mediated by trickster Lulu:

He lay down in her arms.
Whirling blackness swept through him,
and there was nothing else to do.
The wings didn't beat as hard as they
used to, but the bird still flew. (88)

The solace may only be in a singular instant but its very existence offers hope and sustenance when Beverly returns to mainstream society.

King's alienation is amplified by his Euroamerican wife, Lynnette. In a complex poker scene King expiates his transgressions. Although he snitches on the fugitive, Gerry, King plays by the rest of Gerry's moral imperatives. Earlier, his testimony had convicted the innocent Gerry. Card crimping, a trick passed on by Lulu, give Gerry and Lipsha the advantage. King loses and reluctantly forfeits the car, a Firebird, bought with June's insurance money. After Gerry vanishes "into thin space" (265), King apologizes to the police, ensuring Gerry's ultimate escape.

King's life of self-indulgence had deprived his half-brother Lipsha of his inheritance, both in

material goods and understanding his ancestry. However, King functions as mediator, bringing Gerry and Lipsha together for the first time with knowledge of their true relationship as father and son, providing the mode of their deliverance.

The use of a car as an emblem of identity is one of many transportation symbols in Erdrich's novels. In a twist on the historic warrior pony, the automobile, sign of "advanced" technology, becomes a mode of deliverance. June hitches a ride to get home but abandons the pickup and the casual sexual encounter, walking into the snow that will snuff out her life. Henry, Sr., stalls his car on the railroad tracks, ending his life. Lyman drives his red convertible into the river after witnessing Henry, Jr., drown. Lynette seeks refuge in the car that King violently attacks. Lulu seduces Nector in a car, but Marie entices him in the wilderness. Gordie Kashpaw's reconciliation to the memory of June is mediated by the transforming deer he hits with his car while driving drunk.

Marvin Magalaner suggests:

[T]he movement of the young Chippewas from fishing and swimming to reckless driving in automobiles signals the encroachment of

a mechanical and impersonal civilization
upon the natural environment of the
families. (107)

Such an assessment is intended to unnaturally
preserve an environment of historicism and
traditionalism in circumstances marked by dynamism
and change. Rather, the car is an adaptive mode,
translating and modulating the lives of the
characters as they establish identity in the
contemporary world. Erdrich says:

The cars really become sort of
repositories for the souls of the dead in
this book, and they're also shelter,
they're many things. We've lived with
cars that are alter-egos through the
years. (Bonetti 90)

In another multifaceted play on image,
transforming historic perceptions by modulating into
the modern world, Erdrich renders a new
comprehension of the Noble Savage. In "The Plunge
of the Brave" chapter, Nector is employed as dying
Indians in Western movies and a model for a
painting. With a backdrop of allusions and
references to Moby Dick, paradigm of Western
Civilization novelistic tradition, the Noble Savage
is parodied and transformed. After posing for an
artist, Nector has an epiphany:

Later on, that picture would become famous. It would hang in the Bismarck state capitol. There I was, jumping off a cliff, naked of course, down into a rock river. Certain death. Remember Custer's saying? The only good Indian is a dead Indian? . . . When I saw that the greater world was only interested in my doom, I went home on the back of a train. . . . I remembered that picture, and I knew that Nector Kashpaw would fool the pitiful rich woman that painted him and survive the raging water. (91)

The painting is a prime example of sentimentalism that romantically relegates the Native American to the absolute past of Noble Savagery. Nector rejects that drowning in artistic domination and embraces another image of watery survival. He intones:

"Call me Ishmael," I said sometimes, only to myself. For he survived the great white monster like I got out of the rich lady's picture. He let the water bounce his coffin to the top. In my life so far I'd gone easy and come out on top, like him. (91-92)

Later, recognizing his violence, weaknesses, and desires for control, as he tries to justify his affair with Lulu and burns her house, he realizes he may be more like Ahab, stating, "for now I see sings of the captain in myself" (108).

Nector's identification with archetypal characters, drawn not from Chippewa cosmology but from the literary canon of Western Civilization,

does not demonstrate acculturation but multiplicity in his cultural heritage. Nector's indignant outrage toward exploitation in the dominant culture drives him home to affiliate with the tribal community. Thomas Matchie suggests that Nector's comic/tragic duality is "a type of figure not uncommon in Melville" (481). Additionally, Nector's metaphors and play with Moby Dick function as connectors to literature and readers of the dominant society, a literature most minorities must study, while preserving his individuality and tribal consciousness.

A major issue of assimilation in Love Medicine is manifest in the role of Catholicism and the Native American characters. Lipsha and Nector conflate the two traditions, attending Holy Mass but incorporating their own beliefs. As an old man, no longer constrained by social proprieties, Nector would burst out with traditional songs in the middle of Mass or shout for God to hear. Lipsha explains his beliefs:

Now there's your God in the Old Testament and there is Chippewa Gods as well. Indian Gods, good and bad, like tricky Nanabozho or the water monster Missepeshu. . . . (194)

His conclusion is that God is deaf, so Nector must yell his prayers, or perhaps "we just don't speak [the Higher Power's] language" (197). Belief in Catholic or Christian cosmology or Chippewa mythology is not mutually exclusive.

Sister Leopolda's sadistic treatment of Marie Lazarre is initially read as a critique on the dominance and harsh racism of the Church. However, when the Sister Leopolda is identified as Pauline Puyat, from Tracks, and it is known that Marie is actually her abandoned daughter, the motivations and reproaches become complex. The relationships of mother to daughter--expressed as mother denying daughter, daughter unaware but pulled like a magnet to the aging nun/mother and accompanied by granddaughter--remove the European versus Indigenous conflict. The Church, despite all the satire of mysticism and self-mortification, becomes mediator for this relationship. Marie, one quarter blood or less, lives in both worlds of Catholicism and tribal unity, adopting and rearing foundlings of the tribe, including June and Lipsha.

Lipsha Morrissey, reared by Nector and Marie Kashpaw, narrates the chapter "Love Medicine." His

rhetoric is a confluence of modern slang and laxity, sparkled with poetic insights:

I got the touch. It's a thing you got to be born with. I got secrets in my hands that nobody ever knew to ask. Take Grandma Kashpaw with her tired veins all knotted up in her legs like clumps of blue snails. I take my fingers and I snap them on the knots. The medicine flows out of me. (190)

At the request of Marie, Lipsha attempts to perform a love medicine on Nector to rein in his wandering lusts and unquenchable desire for Lulu Lamartine. Lipsha conjectures a ritual combination of his magic touch and goose hearts, since geese mate for life. He is not aware that Nector and Marie meet and make love when Nector is delivering geese to the convent Marie is escaping. Because Lipsha's ineptitude prevents him from getting the goose hearts, he buys turkeys hearts from the supermarket. For double insurance, he asks the Catholic priest to bless them, but the Father and a Sister both refuse. Lipsha blesses them himself with holy water. A sacred ritual improperly performed precipitates sacrificial and tragic crisis. Indeed, Nector chokes on the turkey heart and dies. His death is comically rendered with

Lipsha's desperate attempts at revival. Lipsha also understands:

It was other things that choked him as well. It didn't seem like he wanted to struggle or fight. Death came and tapped his chest, so he went just like that.
(208)

The horror of the scene is mediated by the comic incongruity and veracity of Lipsha's observations.

If this episode were told in the tradition of Western Civilization, without trickster humor, it would merely be tragic. Lipsha, as trickster, flaunts the sacred details of ritual, destroys hierarchy of Catholicism, and provokes disaster. Nector's death is a natural consequence of Lipsha's ineptitude. In this novel the moment of death is mythical, not only because of the tragic consequences, but it is humorous as "his [Nector's] life" flashes not before Nector but before Lipsha, synthesizing past, present, and future, transforming Lipsha's understanding.

Lipsha's insights help him confront the truths about himself and his pluralistic heritage. His voice, clear and poetic, in the tradition of oral rhetoric closes the novel:

The sun flared. I'd heard that this river was the last of an ancient ocean, miles deep, that once had covered the Dakotas and solved all our problems. It was easy to still imagine us beneath them vast unreasonable waves, but the truth is we live on dry land. I got inside. The morning was clear. A good road led on. So there was nothing to do but cross the water and bring her home. (272)

The elements of fire, water, earth, and the clear air of morning holistically converge on Lipsha. He senses the power of the place and its connection to his own self. His cognizance allows him to harmonize the disparate sources of his being, his history, and mediate for June and her emblematic car, bringing them home.

The multicultural world of modern Indians is presented in Love Medicine with numerous metaphors and images common to both Native American cultures and dominant American cultures. In "Where I Ought to Be: A Writer's Sense of Place," Erdrich says:

Whether we like it or not, we are bound together by that which may be cheapest and ugliest in our culture but which may also have an austere and resonant beauty in its economy of meaning. (23)

The Chippewa elements of Love Medicine emphasize the uniqueness of that Native American culture. Less obvious are iconic images of mainstream America that

interweave throughout the novel: pickled eggs, pies, fishing hats, kitschy Indian art, Polar Bear refrigeration trucks, learning enrichments and Sesame Street, jeans, tennis shoes, army jackets and a Firebird. Placed in a Native American context, these signs are given new meanings, disclosing the pluralism of the novel. The imagery brings home the characters who mediate the emblems of many cultures.

The three novels, Tracks, The Beet Queen, and Love Medicine, all demonstrate a multiplicity of cultures adapting to a particular place and time in history. Rooted in the earth and historical past, Tracks shows, through Nanapush and Pauline's telling, the apocalyptic effects of social, economic and cultural change in accommodating the dominant American culture. The atmospheric The Beet Queen reveals Native American tribal influences and values in a predominantly Euroamerican community. Love Medicine contains the watery images of drowning and baptismal, ritualistic rebirth of modern Native American communities, a survival through cultural mediation.

The three novels demonstrate a continuity of characters, a desperate quest to maintain identity in a changing universe. The narrative techniques of various voices and overlapping allow those characters to articulate and interpret their circumstances, accommodating the transition from an oral culture to a literate culture. The paradox of individuation within the communal structure occurs in storytelling. The varying recitations are a performance of past, present, and future. They present the pluralistic world in which events are culturally encoded and tolerated. This world of acceptance is not relegated to relativism but presents a moral structure implemented by the trickster archetype.

In addition to the elemental unification of earth, air, and water, the novels merge in imagery, ontology of place, ritual, and continuance of character and families. The sense of progress does not come through technological innovations but in human resilience that accommodates a multitude of cultures.

Chapter 4

A New World Discovery in The Crown of Columbus

The Crown of Columbus¹ is the only novel published under both names, Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris. Timed to coincide with the Columbus Quincentenary, the novel confronts political and historical consequences of the Columbus encounter. Erdrich and Dorris enter the fictive world with metonymic characters of the Native American and European world, illustrating the monolithic mind of one culture and the multicultural adaptability of the other. This novel tells the story of Columbus as only Native Americans would. The authors concede the pragmatic awareness that the past cannot be changed but challenge our understanding and interpretation of historical events, inviting a living dynamic. Using the novelistic literary

¹ Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich. The Crown of Columbus (New York: Harper Collins, 1991). All subsequent references will be to this edition and noted parenthetically in the text.

medium of Western Civilization, Erdrich and Dorris fuse their Native American characters with tradition and the realities of living in a modern culture, while granting them access to ancestral voices. The resolution of the plot addresses the totality of the human community that we are challenged to recover.

The Crown of Columbus has Dorris as its major author, with Erdrich as major researcher (Today). Both had previously conceived a character similar to the mixed-blood Vivian Twostar and spent about ten years researching and developing her. Although a tempting assumption would be that Dorris is responsible for the male voice of Roger Williams and Erdrich created Twostar, both worked on each character, and both contributed to the epic poem at the climax of the plot (Dorris, Cedar City). This novel is a bold attempt to fuse cultures and ideas and to reconcile the divisions of the past five hundred years, healing the human community and reconsidering the historical implications of Columbus' journey from a multicultural point of view, offering a meditation to the human past and the pluralistic future.

The Crown of Columbus is told primarily by two narrative voices and their diametric points of view, the mixed blood Native American, Vivian Twostar, and the preppie poet, Roger Williams. Both are conducting research on Columbus for the quincentenary, Vivian for a tenure-securing article in the Dartmouth alumni magazine and Roger for an epic poem. Their manners of research, their lives, and their personal habits are polar opposites. Yet, the two become lovers. Obviously, their love-child is a fusion of two antithetical cultures joined at the initial contact of Columbus' infamous navigational error.

As if the name were not obvious enough (the historical Puritan Roger Williams was banished to Rhode Island and sympathized with Native Americans in the 1600s), Professor Roger Williams is stuffy and meticulous, not immune to mockery by Vivian:

Roger Williams, well-known narrative poet, critics' darling, Byronic media star recently featured in People magazine brooding on a plaster bust of his subject, Columbus, and poising a Mont Blanc pen against his handsome chin. (16)

The character of Roger is laden with satire of singular vision, academia, and self-consciousness.

He flees from love, has "competitive myopia" (148), and over-analyzes and verbalizes emotions and instincts. Prefacing his first encounter with Vivian, Roger says:

Love, if it exists is a constant state, at rest and stable, the very antithesis of passion--with which it is often confused. Love is solid, connected without fissure to the planet's core. Passion, on the other hand, is volatile, molten, ever ready to erupt and spill. (41)

Such conscientious dissection denigrates human emotion to a scientific and linguistic understanding, arresting what it describes.

Roger's *summa magnolia* on Columbus, oralized in a performance in the final passages of the book, has fascinating language and epic significance to the Western hemisphere. The epic form is a wonderful, ontological representation of Western Civilization, beginning with Homer's Iliad which, ironically, may be oral literature. Nevertheless, the curmudgeon Roger is aware that he dwells in the literacy of the epic past:

And then, undeniable, stinging, and utterly prosaic, it came to me: I had lived too long at a distance from life. The dynamic I observed, critiqued, wrote about, was past and fixed on the printed page. My major experience was with code, not fluid context. I dealt in retrospect,

reexamination, research, reason,
recollection, not in events unfolding. In
the present tense I floundered, unable to
act until I saw what happened. (67)

Vivian is more complex, representing circular, mythic time. Her surname, Twostar, reflects her culmination of pan-Indianism, with Sioux and Navajo background, and dominant culture education, filling the minority quota on the faculty and struggling with her own survival agenda. She lives with a traditional Navajo Grandmother and a traditionless teenage son. Vivian feels the frustration of being a Native American in the modern world:

I was born changed, dropped running into
the current of events with no rock for
bearing. It seemed sometimes as though I
had spent my life reacting, a silver
sphere in a pinball machine flipped
against one brightly lit obstacle after
another. For years I gathered speed,
slowed down, rolled on, but found no
resting place, aimed in no direction by my
own will. But that was history. (138)

Vivian's voice is naturally poetic but also includes metaphors of popular culture. She directly addresses the issues of marginality, mixed blood, and a multicultural background:

I belong to the lost tribe of mixed
bloods, that hodge-podge amalgam of hue
and cry that defies easy placement. When
the DNA of my various ancestors--Irish and
Coeur d'Alene and French and Navajo and

God knows what else--combined to form me, the result was not some genteel, undecipherable puree that comes from a Cuisinart. You know what they say on the side of the Bisquick box, under instruction for pancakes? Mix with fork. Leave lumps. That was me. . . . I've read learned anthropological papers written about people like me. We're called marginal, as if we exist anywhere but on the center of the page. Our territory is the place for asides, for explanatory notes, for editorial notation. We're parked on the bleachers looking into the arena, never the main players, but there are bonuses to peripheral vision. Out beyond the normal bounds, you at least know where you're not. You escape the claustrophobia of belonging, and what you lack in security you gain by realizing--as those insiders never do--that security is an illusion. We're jealous of innocence, I'll admit that, but as the hooks and eyes that connect one core to the other we have our roles to play. "Caught between two worlds," is the way we're often characterized, but I'd put it differently. We are the catch. (123-124)

Vivian is the every-Indian of modern America. Through genetic durability, cultural mediation, intermarriage, and toleration of paradox, she has survived. Like most Native Americans, she is not perfect or pure blood; her ritual ties, through her grandmother, have been altered by a history of Catholic influence and cultural adaptation.

In this novel, Vivian articulates the revisionist history regarding Columbus felt by most tribal peoples. She describes her work:

My course was a survey of pre-1492 tribes but I always use the final class to introduce the impact of the Old World. Without writing systems, it was impossible for North American Indians to preserve precise accounts of their initial meeting with Europeans, and so I had to rely on hearsay, to read between the lines of the often pompous and fatuously self-serving Spanish or English accounts. (81)

Vivian then launches into a litany of encounter tragedies: the cultural imperialism of Europeans, the diversity of the natives, the virgin soil epidemics that destroyed countless peoples. This section of the novel is not political diatribe but a carefully constructed dialogue between teacher and students, between Western Civilization and New World cultures. The language Vivian uses is poetic, revering the power of the spoken word and thus revealing her heritage of orality by both form and content.

Vivian's son, Nash, is the obviously dispossessed character, full of radicalism and anger. He is trying to find his own voice and definition. Roger sees Nash as ignorant because of

his indifference to the canons of Western Civilization. Nevertheless, Nash's intensity is in his search for identity:

It's because [Columbus] came here with an attitude, a power attitude, and he imposed it. First on Indians, then on the land. It was like "I'm it. You're shit," and that's the way it's been ever since. I think different, see? Anglos aren't 'it.' We're not even it. *Human beings* aren't it . . . Nature [is]. We're all part of it together. (112)

Later, Nash and Roger find a common ground, and Nash's character mediates the plurality of influences in his life, giving him voice to narrate the climax of the novel.

Vivian's other child, Violet, is fathered by Roger and engenders mundane trivia surrounding babies. The particulars, such as the jogging/nursing bra and sex complicated by flowing mammaries function as another means of cultural mediation, giving attention to vernacular speech and details while celebrating the continuity of the human spirit. Violet is characterized in a swift stroke by Vivian's voice:

I was the box seat from which my daughter viewed the world, and because all was new to her, she was content to accept and scrutinize whatever vista I allowed . . . With me she spent each day in the dimmed

and hushed hallways of Baker library . . . She translated her life one page at a time, sought meaning from the evidence at hand. She came to expect, to depend upon order, and, hungry and curious, she cultivated a wide frequency to catch every variance. In those quiet halls my daughter became so sensitive that when she found herself in a normal context--a grocery store, a restaurant--her systems overloaded and she went off like an alarm. (114-115)

On the other hand, Roger sees Violet as a literal "*tabula rasa*" and the metaphor of culture, values, and environment should be obvious. Like many other metaphors, Roger has to explain the meaning to the reader. He also explains that he is Columbus and Vivian his unmarried lover, Beatriz Peraz. Fortunately, Roger stops short of explaining that Vivian is Indian and he is white, but that is the underlying union in the book.

Minor characters are masterfully drawn as a method of connecting past and present realities and cultural differences. The Navajo grandmother is a mixture of strict Catholicism and blanket traditionalism. From Roger's view:

I had a sort of mother-in-law, fierce and unyielding, a Saint Augustine devotee wrapped in a Pendleton blanket who could not even be depended upon to return my greeting when I entered her presence. . .

. "Chastity," she intoned, as if thinking aloud. "A mother's fervent prayer."
 "Meet Saint Monica," Vivian said.
 "Welcome to purgatory." (180)

One of Vivian's students makes a brief appearance and is portrayed with tight economy of language:

One of my fanatics this term wouldn't last long--he was too sweet, too heart-on-his-sleeve, with the angel face and white-blond curls of Art Garfunkel and the conviction that he should attend a Lakota ceremonial gathering. He carried Black Elk Speaks against his heart. The Sioux would eat him for lunch. (81)

This singular paragraph not only reveals the creative power of the authors, but unmask in a brief space the languages of romanticism, idealism, realism, and satire. Vivian mediates her heritage and her academic position by her awareness of the student and his sentimental colonialism.

By contrast, the capitalistic villain of the novel, Cobb, is a caricature of evil, never fully motivated or explained, perhaps because he is viewed only through Roger's or Vivian's liberal-minded interpretations. Vivian notes: "Cobb's cynicism was so deep-rooted that it verged on the profound" (197).

The novel shifts to Cobb's home on the island of Eleuthera in the Bahamas from Dartmouth, New Hampshire, home of America's first Indian college. The setting contributes to plot development in Dartmouth as historic Indian students and professor Vivian intersect, recalling the history of Native American relations in the United States. The second locale of the novel, Eleuthera, assumes mythical significance as the site of Columbus' landing and repository for new discovery.

Vivian, in her haphazard scholarship, finds a page from the missing diary of Columbus. The page contains a reference to a crown. The evil Cobb wants the crown in order to salvage his crumbling financial empire. Vivian wants the rest of the diary (in Cobb's possession) to vindicate history. Roger wants the diary to justify his epic poem. About half the novel occupies the resolution of the search for the crown, much of it in an Indiana Jones type adventure that is also reminiscent of Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales that immortalized the Noble Savage.

Roger never abandons his pedantic voice, even when his life is endangered, dragging the plot

through the Caribbean. Motivated by his love for Violet, he is finally spurred to action with disastrous results. As he is facing death in a cave full of bat guano, he recites his epic poem of Columbus.

The sixteen page poem included in the novel at the climax began as a fictional re-creation of Columbus' diary. It was published apart from the novel under the pen name Roger Williams as "Diary of a Lost Man," Caliban 1991. The inclusion of the poem exemplifies the mixing genres and voices characteristic of the multicultural backgrounds of the authors. The poem begins:

I do not know myself. No more than the
 thread
 woven in the field of cloth
 knows the pattern. No more than the
 pattern
 apprehends the mind that devised it, or
 the hand
 that drew the shuttle or the strength
 that bent and pegged the wooden loom.
 No more than the garment
 knows its purpose, its make,
 do I know Columbus. (309-10)

Dorris has noted that Native Canadians refer to multiculturalism not as mosaic but as a pattern, like a patchwork quilt. "Pattern" is a recurring metaphor of Roger's epic. The closing image of the

poem is of "leveling the ground" (325). As Dorris has explained, a key to Native American survival was their experience of multiculturalism evident in the vast number of cultures and languages believed to exist at the time of the Columbus encounter. Additionally, the facility to "tolerate paradox" allowed Native peoples to keep their sacred beliefs, unlike the Jews or the Moors who would rather die than convert, while succumbing to European religious objectives (Cedar City).

The resolution of the plot in The Crown of Columbus focuses on these sacred conflicts, yet, is full of ironies. Haphazardly, Roger serendipitously discovers the hiding place of the crown. Deliberately and painstakingly, Vivian rescues Roger and discovers the crown through meticulous research. Violet, after a brief raft trip in a subplot as Moses in the bulrushes, is rescued in a Christian church by a Virgin Mary figure and offers hope and new life. The significance of the discovery of the crown is narrated by Nash, who has discovered his own voice and identity. The crown is no surprise with foreshadowing signs flashing throughout the novel:

There must have been sound. Glass makes noise when it shatters on the rock. But sometimes one sense overpowers all the others, blocks them out, and this time it was sight. Our eyes registered and recorded the event, not our ears.

There, framed by a halo of shards, was a twisted brown circle, a few pointed sticks.

There must have been sound. Five people breathing, a baby at the end of her patience. And yet all was still. Even the wind seemed to pause, to draw into itself.

Like Cobb, I had expected jewels. Diamonds, rubies, emeralds. I had expected gold, the most valuable thing, the object that in and of itself was supposed to so dazzle the people Columbus found that they would welcome all those who came after.

"It was a crown after all," Mom said.

And it was a crown, no mistake. I recognized it from the picture over Grandma's bed: It was the Crown of Thorns.
(169)

The ultimate irony is that Columbus thought he was offering the most priceless object in the whole world while the recipients granted it no value at all. The moment of modern discovery of the crown shatters the whole Columbus legend; suddenly the discovery of the New World is no longer mythical, epic, political or economic but comic, ironic, and inevitably tragic. This cathartic epiphany is fundamental to the accepting multiculturalism of the human community.

Robert Houston has said in his New York Times review of the novel:

In the end, "The Crown of Columbus" never really finds itself. It's as if in hoping to disguise any didactic intent, it tries on too many costumes--domestic comedy, paperback thriller, novel of character, love story--and finally decides that, unable to make up its mind, it will simply wear them all at once.

This criticism overlooks the complications of real life where Native Americans wear many costumes, traditional, modern, academic, and occupational, all reflective of the multicultural patterns of existence. Perhaps the critic is not considering the ethnopoetic performance of the work in language and rhythm, the postmodern layering of ironies, or the trickster comedy that plays with convention.

The novel unifies the contemporary world with the human past by directly confronting a most significant event in Western civilization. It reorients through the expression of Erdrich and Dorris whose language offers a multicultural understanding and rhetoric respectful of the oral tradition. Mediation and reconciliation occurs in the character of Nash, who, through his own experiences, finds a poetic voice. The human

community is harmonized as The Crown of Columbus assesses, in Benamou's words:

the historical context of the minorities, especially [sic] on the history of colonization and its effects not only on dominated but also on the dominant cultures. (152)

Like a marriage that brings two separate individuals into union, the characters and the cultures they represent join for their mutual benefit. The Crown of Columbus demonstrates the complications facing many Native Americans who are isolated from their tribal heritage, forced to abandon communal heritage, and compete in the marketplace. Erdrich and Dorris play with the racism of ignorance and with the follies of the dominant culture in the characters of Roger Williams, Cobb, Hilda, and Racine. Through humor and irony a dialogue between cultures is created, extending healing and a hope for the future. Nash amplifies the metaphor of the crown when Vivian opens its container with a karate chop:

The world has become a small place, all parts connected, where an Indian using an ancient Asian art can break into an old European box, witnessed by someone who grew up in Australia. . . . The wind returned . . . the crown was lifted, set down again, but its circle didn't

separate. Only the thorns fell off, every one. (369)

The pain of the Columbus encounter is alleviated through multicultural respect. The world is encircled by communal respect for humanity, alluding to Black Elk's many circled metaphor, circumscribed by the Sacred Hoop. The historical anguish is removed, like the thorns, through acknowledgment of diversity.

Chapter 5

Conclusions: More Than Survival

The literary creations by Louise Erdrich present paradox by form and content, by language and composition. Among the many contradictions are the conflux of oral tradition in a written genre, preservation of historical ethics while modulating to the current world, spirituality in an age of scientificism, and communal gathering that celebrates individuality. The irony of community and individuality is also metaphor for the personal entity within the tribal community, for distinct tribal identity within the rubric of Native American nations, and for cultural significance within a pluralistic society.

The sharing of Erdrich's literary explorations with her collaborator/husband, Michael Dorris, also exemplifies the acceptable paradox of individuation and union. Within her writings are multiple experiences that personify her history, her present,

and her hope for the future. Erdrich's poetic voice differs from the implied author(s) of her fiction not in tone, syntax, or crystallized imagery, but in intensity of emotion. Some dramatic situations of the narrative poems are expanded in the novels, but the tetralogy novels present a comprehensive wholeness. The transformation of short fictions into novels and the incorporation of the epic poem into the novel, The Crown of Columbus, indicate a totality of language that renders genres indistinguishable. This comprehensive view of language and the world it represents is a source of survival, manifest in humor, and a hope for new human community.

The poetry of Jacklight and Baptism of Desire has a distinct femininity in tone and subject. Often, the speaker of the poem is clearly a woman addressing husband, children, and a sisterhood in metaphors of nurturing and the sexual imagery of Jacklighting. This feminine sensitivity is not necessarily apologetic or exclusive or overwrought with political agenda. It is merely one aspect of subject and tone that includes Chippewas, Catholicism, and ontology of place in Midwestern

America. Furthermore, when the strength of female characters and themes in the novels are considered, Erdrich's poetry, as a whole, does not seem more distinctly feminine than the coauthored fiction.

Despite the inclusion of the male author, Michael Dorris, the fiction maintains a feminine tone that establishes the strength of women in tribal communities. Additionally, Erdrich coauthored Dorris's novel, A Yellow Raft in Blue Water, which portrays a matriarchal family. Like Erdrich's novels, A Yellow Raft in Blue Water has multiple narrators, in this case, three generations of women. The principle character, Rayona, a mixed blood Native American/African American, was originally intended as a male character but, at the suggestion of Erdrich, was changed after the first draft (Schumacher 31). Dorris also braves the challenge of writing of childbirth from a female character's point of view. Regarding this feminine approach he says:

I was raised by strong women--a mother, three aunts, two grandmothers. I heard their version of the world much more clearly and consistently than I heard anybody else's version (Wong 207)

Dorris's use of matriarchy and Erdrich's feminism of gathering express the strength of independence while confirming the holistic nature of the human community.

Sustained emotion is more focused in Erdrich's poetry than in her fiction, dealing with a single instant in time or a specific topic. As discussed in Chapter Two, many poems are narrative and indicative of the oral tradition. The Potchikoo tales are elevated in their trickster nature, but constructed like prose fiction. The novels are typified by poetic language but have a rhythm balanced with humor and plot development. Nearly all reviews of The Beet Queen note Erdrich's poetic power with several citing this passage:¹

The baby clung like a sloth, heavy with sleep, and latched on in hunger, without waking. She drew milk down silently in one long inhalation. It was then that Celestine noticed, in the fine moonlit floss of her baby's hair, a tiny white spider making its nest.

It was a delicate thing, close to transparent, with long sheer legs. It moved so quickly that it seemed to vibrate, throwing out invisible strings and catching them, weaving its own tensile

¹See Banks, Bly, and Nelson. Tyler does not specifically refer to this passage but alludes to it.

strand. Celestine watched as it began to happen. A web was forming, a complicated house, that Celestine could not bring herself to destroy. (176)

Compare the narrative section of "Saint Clare," subtitled "My Life as a Saint," from Baptism of Desire:

By morning, the strands of the nest
disappear
into each other, shaping
an emptiness within me that I make lovely
as the immature birds make the air
by defining the tunnels and the spirals
of the new sustenance. And then,
no longer hindered by the violence of
their need,
they take to other trees, fling themselves
deep into the world. (8)

Certain fundamental ideas are common:

interconnectedness, nature images, real and metaphorical mothering. The first passage, in the context of a larger novelistic narrative, inserts the necessary plot connections. The second passage magnifies a singular instant. Nevertheless, the generic distinctions are not clear. The interwoven details of the web and nest are figurative of the tribal community, the familial structure, the characters of the novels, and the overall connections with a living universe.

Interrelated union of all existing elements reject artificial divisions of literary genres and

academic disciplines of literature, history, political science, economics, and anthropology. These categories are designated by a culture whose worldview is based on objectivity. Works by Native Americans, and studies of those works, are only divided by tribal distinctions. As Paula Gunn Allen observes:

Literary studies in the field of American Indian studies is [sic] not purely literary in the sense that the discipline is pursued in the west. We critics of Indian literature must be cultural, historical, and political as well as literary scholars because neither traditional peoples (and their literatures) nor contemporary poets and writer can write outside a cultural, historical, and political context. (267)

Erdrich's works transcend classification and reflect a worldview that is holistic.

In addition to questioning genre, Erdrich's poetry and fiction have a textual relationship. Similar themes of cultural mediation, historical examination, and human survival are in all her works. Many poems contain seeds that sprout into novels. The most apparent examples are "The Butcher's Wife" cycle that contains elements of The Beet Queen and the identically titled novel and poem, "Love Medicine." "Family Reunion" gathers

characters in a similar way that June Kashpaw's death reunites her family. The fictive characters in the poems, such as Mary Kröger, Leonard, and Potchikoo, are as individual and human as Mary Adare, Nanapush, or Nector Kashpaw.

Nevertheless, the poetry allows Erdrich to intensely explore subjects without full dramatic structure of the novel. The isolation of specific historical events--Mary Rowlandson's captivity, Saint Clare's weightiness, Orozco's Christ, Charles VI's playing cards, and the Chippewa Windigo and Potchikoo--allow close examination through language without the full and complex plot development of short story or novel. While Celestine and Vivian Twostar are arguably the most nurturing mothers of the novels, the series of motherhood poems focus on moments of intimacy. The novels allow parenting to extend beyond the physical relationships to include extended family and friends in the tribal community.

The fullness of the tribal community is presented in the North Dakota novels, Tracks, The Beet Queen, and Love Medicine. The complexity of historicity embodies all the novels. Although each could stand independently, they are more complete

when considered as a whole. The inclusion of The Beet Queen in tribal narratives demonstrates that Indian tribal communities do not exist in complete isolation but must interact with surrounding societies. Although Native Americans may not overtly manifest their values in The Beet Queen, fundamental principles coexist with the dominant culture. The invisibility available to minorities is inverted with Pauline and the traditional Chippewas in Tracks but essential to Celestine in The Beet Queen.

An apparent contradiction occurs in the unreeling of chronological time in the three novels. Ostensibly they proceed from 1912 through 1984; however, through the storytelling narratives, the events circle through memories of the various narrators, thus eliminating linear progression. The reappearance of the various characters in different novels at various stages of their lives but with personalities intact add to "fluidity" of time (Pearlman and Henderson 147).

Material culture as identifying Chippewa cultural codes is noticeably absent from the novels. However, ritual enactment abounds in storytelling,

in archetypal characters, and in imagery and allusions. Interrupted ritual precipitating sacrificial crisis exists in all three novels: Nanapush's incomplete blessing of Fleur, Wallace's coronation of Dot as Beet Queen, and Lipsha's turkey heart love medicine. In Western Civilization, ritual crisis disrupts hierarchy and precipitates tragic violence. In these novels, despite Nector Kashpaw's timely death that delivers him from senility and suffering, the situation becomes comic.

Survival humor, particularly with the trickster archetype, is essential in Erdrich's novels and poetry. Although often black in tone, humor allows the characters, and the readers, to confront tragic realities. Dorris observes of the "self-deprecating" nature of Love Medicine:

[T]he Native American people who have talked to us about the book absolutely and unanimously pick up on the humor, right from the very beginning. I think many times that non-Indians who read the book feel almost guilty about laughing or finding things that are funny in the book. (Bonetti 96)

Additionally, humor allows social criticism particularly of the Catholic influences in episodes in Love Medicine. Erdrich comments:

I would qualify it [the caustic or corrosive] as survival humor. It is a weapon, a method or a way of maintaining high spirits when things don't seem to go so well. Besides, oppressed people are accustomed to seeing their oppressors ironically. (Rieva 24)

If humor is a means of survival, more important is cultural plurality. Erdrich demonstrates, most acutely with Sita Kozka in The Beet Queen, the failures of humanity due to intolerance. Sita does not hate Celestine or Mary but tries to possess them, and when she cannot, she rejects them. She can only allow their existence on her own terms. She is not openly bigoted but conformingly racist and economically discriminatory in her self-importance. For her own survival as a human being, she must acknowledge Mary and Celestine as differentiated individuals. This relationship becomes metonymic for cultures; for the dominant culture to survive, it must allow and tolerate the differences of minority cultures on their own terms. Those terms include separation and privilege, and equality and integration. Both individuation and union are necessary to establish difference.

Multiculturalism extends beyond conflictual differentiation, celebrating diversity. Some

critical interpretations of Erdrich's work identify a clash of cultures and conclude that conflict produces marginality of the reader (Rainwater), duality in identity (Rayson), an "amphibious mode of realism" (Bak), and rhetoric manifesting Bakhtinian dialogism (Stripes). In Western tradition a conflict of irreconcilables produces tragedy, and, indeed, misfortune is the general tone and conclusion of these articles. Only Stripes suggests an evaluation of Erdrich's position of representing the "Indian" voice, a position which she would reject, and which should include the multiplicity of cultures.

Diversity also concedes that cultures change. Maintaining tradition while coping with change is a paradoxical but imperative quest. Cultural adaptation is necessitated by interracial and intercultural unions. Because mixed blood Native Americans have no preexisting culture, they are compelled to mediate all factors of their background. The omnipresence of race and its attendant social circumstances often lead to an emphasis of tribal heritage while retaining an awareness of multiplicity of lineages.

Erdrich's multiculturalism stems from her personal experiences. She is aware that the stories she weaves preserve a past but also assesses the realities of the present, and projects hope for the future. These stories are who she is. She says:

When both of us look backward we see not only the happiness of immigrants coming to this country, which is part of our background, but we see and are devoted to telling about the lines of people that we see stretching back, breaking, surviving, somehow, somehow and incredibly, culminating in somebody who can tell a story. (Bonetti 98)

The storytelling incorporates the heritage of oral tradition, manifest in a rhetoric of natural images, significance of place, circling narratives, and intimacy. She comments further on the ontological density of place and storytelling:

Unlike most contemporary writers, a traditional storyteller fixed the listener in an unchanging landscape combined of myth and reality. People and place are inseparable. . . . Through the close study of place, its people and character, its crops, products, paranoias, dialects and failures, we come close to our own reality. (Where I Ought to Be 1, 24)

Storytelling cannot be separated from place, self cannot exist outside the community, language is a holistic representation of culture and individual.

Erdrich's personal quest for identity and understanding becomes the quest for all Americans. Whether from a Native American blood heritage or European, all Americans participate in the Indian history of this country. The American Indian shaped the imagination, justifying through negativism the violence and land theft that created America, romanticizing the tragic legacy of domination. The duality of the Noble Savage still pervades popular and high culture. Erdrich's very existence, her drive to tell the stories, and the compelling nature of her stories gracefully extend another opportunity for American culture to heal. Through the power of language, an axiomatic value of the oral tradition, Erdrich not only reminds that Native Americans will continue to adapt and survive, but her works offer general society a vision of *communitas*, union through diversity.

APPENDIX
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1. Entire poems: "The Fence" and "Orozco's Christ"
2. Selected lines (less than twelve) from "Rudy Comes Back,"
"Hydra," "Sunflowers," "Translucence," "The Owls," "The Ritual" and
"Old Man Potchikoo."

A prompt response would be greatly appreciated. Thank you.

Sincerely,

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cc: Louise Erdrich

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Louise Erdrich | P.O. Box 358 | Cornish Flat, NH 03746

27 July 1993


Ms.P.Jane Hafen:
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Dear Ms. Hafen:

You may certainly quote the pieces you mention in your letter.

I wish you all the best of luck in your work and continued success.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Louise Erdrich', written in dark ink.

Louise Erdrich

LE/slc

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