'THE STORY COMES UP DIFFERENT EVERY TIME':

LOUISE ERDRICH AND THE EMERGING AESTHETIC OF THE MINORITY WOMAN WRITER

DISSERTATION

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Alison Dara Gallant, B.A., M.A.

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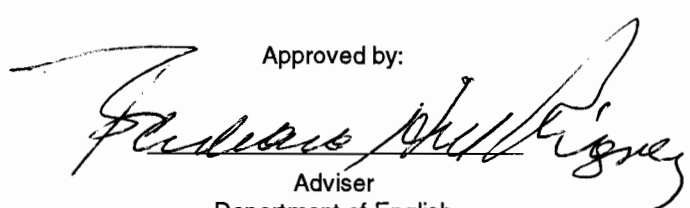
Dissertation Committee:

B.H. Rigney

P. Mullen

J. Prinz

Approved by:



Adviser
Department of English

To My Brother, Andrew

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VITA

September 25, 1963	Born - Columbus, Ohio
1986	B.A., Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio 43210
Spring 1987	Research Associate, Dr. James Phelan, Dept. of English, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio 43210
Fall 1987-Spring 1989	Teaching Assistant, Dept. of English, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio 43210
1988	M.A., Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio 43210
Fall 1990	Lecturer, Dept. of English, Siena College, Loudonville, New York 12210
Summer 1989-present	Candidate, Doctor of Philosophy, Dept. of English, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio 43210

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: English

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INTRODUCTION

In the past decade the novelist and poet Louise Erdrich has established herself as one of the important contributors to American literature of the 20th century. She is one of the few voices of Native American experience to have gained critical and popular attention. Her writing appeals to the feminist critical instinct, i.e., it deals with and confronts issues of gender, language, and power. Her first three novels bear an intertextual relationship, and the power of these novels derives at least partially from the fragmentation of voices and the collision of cultures. Like the equally marginalized novels of Toni Morrison, the devastating reality of the lives of the characters ioverlain by the beauty and power of mystical experience, the transcendent authority of mythical truth. What I hope to show in this dissertation is that Louise Erdrich's artistic expression is shaped by an experience of double alienation from white, patriarchal society. As I examine various subversive writing practices through the course of this project, the reader should bear in mind that I think these practices are part of an emerging aesthetic of minority women writers, a tradition to which Louise Erdrich belongs.

I should at least cursorily qualify what I mean by "feminist critic," and explain why I believe Erdrich's work elicits a feminist reading. When I use the term in relation to myself, I am using it in the broadest sense, that is, one who approaches a literary work assuming that literature, like any meaning-conferring apparatus, is marked by gender. This understanding of literature is not exclusive to feminist critics. Other schools of thought, i.e., Marxists, assume that literary expression is shaped by circumstances of the human condition such as class or race. Adrienne Rich once said that every mind resides in a body, and she is quite correct in putting forth the supposition that gender is an inescapable and shaping fact of our conscious experience, and that indeed there are particularlities to female experience that can neither be understood nor appropriated by

male authority. Any feminist criticism has at its base the assumption that the literary medium is engendered.

Feminist criticism has experienced no shortfall of difficulty in coming into the academy. In 1983, Elaine Showalter leveled charges against her male colleagues in the academy, revealing their uncanny ability to overlook feminist criticism(s) in their anthologies of modern criticism. She also took Jonathon Culler and Terry Eagleton to task for what she saw as their appropriations of feminist criticism for critical theory. Carolyn Heilbrun too has noted the cold shoulder feminism has received from the academy, pointing to the apparent hypocrisy of embracing a system of thought that questions the meaning of meaning - deconstructionism - but denying feminism a voice in such questionings.

I myself have only come to feminist criticism recently, and I do not dare pretend to have completely assimilated all the complexities of feminist criticism(s) and its complicated relationship to post-structuralism, psychoanalysis and marxism. My perception of Louise Erdrich's fiction as distinctly feminine was greatly informed by the thought and writings of a countless number of American and English feminist literary critics, as well as some of the members of the French school(s), such as Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray. Cixous and Irigaray and their theories of l'ecriture feminine have been useful in several chapters.

All femininst critics writing in the 1990's should pay tribute to the contributions of the French feminist critics Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva. Although at times tediously obscure and mystifying (they, especially Kristeva, assume for the reader an advanced knowledge of linguistics, philosophy and psychoanalysis), these three women have opened up avenues of thought previously unexplored by their American colleagues. Kristeva's Revolution in Poetic Language, published in 1974 as a doctoral thesis, offers a theory of the processes involved in the acquisition of language. She revises Lacan's distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic order into a distinction between what she renames the "semiotic" and the symbolic, and it is the interplay between the semiotic and the symbolic which constitutes the signifying process. The semiotic phase is linked to the pre-Oedipal phase, predominantly anal and oral. Kristeva borrows the

greek word Chora to describe this phase of articulation, a phase of articulation that precedes figurative articulation, analogous to vocal and kinetic rhythm. It is at the Oedipal stage, the split from maternal continuity and the semiotic continuum, that the subject enters into the symbolic order, enabling the subject to distinguish itself from the other, to attribute differences, and thus enter in to the process of signification. Entrance into the symbolic is thus characterized by separation and absence from the mother, and the Chora is repressed and is experienced as a subliminal pressure from within symbolic language: contradictory, meaningless, disruptive, the space of silences and absences. This repressed Chora in language, that which we equate with the mother, the feminine, has its analogue in the text, the imperceptible part of the text, that which remains elusive, the unconscious dimension which escapes the writer and the reader. One must read not only the text, but the nontext, the parantheses, the silences. The idea of meaning being eternally elusive - Derrida's notion of <u>differance</u> - puts into peril the stability of paternal authority. Derrida undoes paternal authority but offers nothing in its stead. This is where Helene Cixous begins her exploration of a maternal. Cixous accepts Lacan's theory on the two poles in language: that of condensation, substitution, metaphor (symptom), and that of concatenation, metonymy (desire). Combining Lacan's idea of the endless chain of signifiers and Derrida's <u>differance</u>, Cixous tries to locate a feminine articulation from a feminine border. Cixous posits that the feminine can be read as the living, as something that continues to escape all boundaries, that cannot be pinned down or controlled. It is a drive to life, flowing and abundant. She espouses an essentialism which many have had trouble accepting, proposing that women do write differently, and she attempts to trace the effects in artistic productions of the inscription of desire, of the feminine libido. This freeing up of the Chora, the repressed, eroticizes writing, unleashes the body and the senses.

The entrance into the symbolic order is characterized by both the separation from the mother, the representative of nature, and identification with the father, the representative of culture. According to Lacanian theory, women occupy a negative position in language because they lack the positive symbol of gender around which language is organized, the phallus. Thus,

the primary signifier in this psychoanalytically informed view, is the phallus. If then the phallus is the primary signifier in a system of signs, where the phallus is equated with presence and the mother with absence, then women necessarily bear a problematic relationship to language, one that sets them at a disadvantage.

Before returning to Kristeva, let me make a brief summary of some of the other schools of French feminist criticism which have heavily informed my reading of Erdrich. Luce Irigaray also rejects Lacan's conclusions about women and their positions as outsiders. She attributes their outsider status not so much to the result of the Oedipal exchange but rather to centuries of subordination of women's sexuality, bodies and needs. She cites the suppression of women beginning in the works of Plato, moving through Hegel, Freud and Levi-Strauss. Women have been defined (and have subsequently internalized these definitions) as the Other, irrational, a man without a penis, and set in opposition to culture. Irigaray calls upon women to assert their specificity as women. Whereas male sexuality is focused on the penis, women's sexuality is more geographically diversified. Irigaray posits that women's desire does not speak the same language as male sexual desire because it is diffuse and not centered; it is more multiple, more complex, more subtle. Because of her sexual difference, because she desires differently, she expresses differently; she is indefinitely other in herself, contradictory, capricious. And Irigaray suggests, that is why women's expression seems to go off in all directions and why it may be difficult to discern any coherence of meaning. For those who approach women's writing with ready made codes, the conventional tools of deciphering, she may find herself at a loss. Cixous, also a believer in women's specificity, echoes Irigaray in describing women's libido as not centered, but as cosmic, and so her writing, her expression can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning limits. Erdrich's fiction is characterized by this sense of limitlessness; it is transgressive writing. Because of the folkloric quality of her characters narratives, there is a built-in sense of endless repetition, a sense that this story has been told many times, an insistence that it be told again ("the story comes up different every time..."), limitless in the number of contributors, limitless in the variations. It is the kind of writing that borrows from folktale, legend

and myth, expression that is not neatly contained, but has a seamlessness and fluidity about it. Her writing exists on an open, ongoing, dynamic continuum an attribute which gives her work the feel of epic. And there are conscious allusions to this conception of limitlessness, as we find in the first passage in Tracks, when Nanapush reflects that "the earth is limitless and so is luck and so were our people once"(p.1, T). Erdrich's writing is characterized by a profusion that is distinctly feminine.

Kristeva is less woman-centered than Irigaray and Cixous. She acknowledges that men have access to more feminine modes of writing, that there are male writers who have access to this pre-linguistic erotic energy, with its polymorphous bodily pleasures and rhythmic play of mother-infant. The energies are channelled from the unconscious and appear in the symbolic in the form of ruptures and rhythmic breaks. Kristeva's theory is less body centered and more psychoanalytically determined. She focuses on the dialectic between the pulsions of the semiotic and the structures of the symbolic, whatever the gender of the writer. Cixous and Irigaray, from whose theories I borrowed more heavily than Kristeva's in my reading of Erdrich , focus more on women's sexual morphology as the shaping essence of women's writing. Women write in a way that reflects the doubleness, complexity and multi-centered libidinal energy that is theirs; their psychosomatic specificity might deform and transform language and modes of storytelling. In Erdrich's writing I tease out the otherness, the doubleness, the other meaning which is forever in the process of weaving itself. Erdrich plays with meaning and language, invokes codes that conflict and undo each other so that meaning is ever slippery, never fixed and immobilized. Erdrich's fiction challenges the center, singularity, linearity, fixity and phallologocentricity. Erdrich's writing, I will argue, is an example of *l'ecriture feminine*, full of contradictions, and complexities that resist resolution, and full of female erotic energy. The feminine exists in the vocality of her writing. Nanapush in Tracks directly addresses his granddaughter/daughter/niece, and in this we find a type of writing that dramatizes the relatedness of women, the intersubjective contiguity (mother-infant) which is distinctly feminine. Erdrich's writing, I will argue, contains stylistic and formal tendencies that are distinctly feminine: the multiplicity of voices, the circularity

of its trajectory, and resistance against closure. I should be careful to note that although a circular trajectory — a pattern of circular return, a return to the origins — occurs with such frequency in the writing of women, it is by no means unique to women's writing. There have been numerous assaults in linearity by many modern male writers. We need to look no further than Jean Toomer's Cane for verification of that. And in Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury and As I Lay Dying we find a multiplicity of voices. But such characteristics, especially the circularity and lack of closure, are so pervasive in the writing of women that they are defining characteristics. The circularity of some narratives is underscored and thrown into relief by the form of the self-begetting novel, novels in which the narrative "ends" with the protagonist sitting down to write the novel we just read, such as we find in Laurence's The Diviners and Lessing's The Golden Notebook.

Julia Kristeva posits a relationship between the female and the cyclic in her essay, "Women's Time." In this essay, Kristeva links female subjectivity to cyclical time, to cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature. It is also true that there have been civilizations and cultures in which repetition is the fundamental conception of time, particularly mystical cultures. The fact that the cyclical is associated with the feminine does not render it fundamentally incompatible with "masculine" values. But Kristeva's interest in women's time lies mostly in formulating an argument in the arena of contemporary political theory. Her interest has nothing to do with women's sense of time and how it relates to their creation of narrative. Nevertheless, her insights have been helpful in sustaining an argument about a women's aesthetic, for it may reveal something about how women tell a story. Although Erdrich's narratives are not neatly circular, there is a returning to the origins and a circular structure between the three novels. All three narratives are full of flashbacks and rely heavily on surrealistic modes to move the story along, so that we are momentarily lifted out of time and chronology is disrupted. And more important than circularity and repetition in Erdrich is the disruption of chronology and the implication that chronology cannot contain the story. Paula Gunn Allen notes that this disruption of chronology, manifested in lateral narration movement,

digressions, and free associations, is characteristic of writing by Native Americans.

As readers we bring to the text a linear sense of time, and our temporal paradigm functions in our construction of meaning. Events build on each other and through a progressive chain of events, we read into character, motivation, etc. Without such an encoding, our registering of details, behaviors, events would be chaotic. Novels that play with linearity then challenge and subvert our temporal paradigms, bringing to our attention the very biases in our reading behaviors, and in this way, such novels are metafictional, for to call attention to the contract between reader and writer is often metafictional. It forces us to drop our rigid codes and our insistence on meaning and make way for multiplicities of meaning. We reassess the compulsion to locate and delineate a plot; indeed, Erdrich defies the reader's attempt to locate a conventional plot - in Umberto Eco's definition, a temporal sequence of characters' actions traceable along a "constant curve" with a teleological aim (132). The political dimensions of this cannot be overlooked: our notions of plot correlate with our notions of history, i.e., to be able to say this is what happened is an exercise of power and authority. It forces us to reconsider our assessments of what events are significant. It reaffirms the notion that narrative can exist outside and independent of plot as Native Americans (and women, as Kristeva would have it) can and do exist outside of history. The characters, particularly the breeds and the full-bloods like Fleur, are created outside of a history-based understanding. History does not have the last word here: Erdrich wrests history (and linear time which is its premise) from its despotic position and brings it, along with dream, fantasy, myth, tale and internal dialogue into the service of narrative.

Cixous and Irigaray provide my study of Erdrich's fiction with a theoretical basis, but there are other tendencies at work in her writing which require addressing. First of all, one must assume that in any expression there are implicit, and sometimes explicit statements about sex and gender. Erdrich's work makes some very conspicuous statements about gender and socially-constructed gender roles, a fact that had initially incited me to a feminist reading. Criticism in the past has had the tendency to overlook feminist themes in the works of women novelists, such as Virginia Woolf and Katherine Anne Porter, both of whom dealt with the sexual politics of their

place and time. Critics, when they do talk about Woolf, prefer to address her stylistic innovations. Though Erdrich may not have ever spoken of her works as dealing with feminist themes, there are undoubtedly issues in her novels that go to the heart of feminist concerns which any honest reading cannot ignore. I found this to be especially true in her second novel, The Beet Queen, in the juxtapositioning of women like Celestine James and Mary Adare against Sita Kozka. The implicit statements about gender and gender roles I believe have to be viewed not so much from feminist conceptions born out of any American or European tradition, a tradition rooted in such thinkers as Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, Mary Wollenstonecraft, with its emphasis on equality, liberty, individuality and so on. All of this thinking still exists within a predominantly patriarchal worldview. Rather, I believe that Erdrich's creation of gendered characters, and the implicit statements therein, are borne out of a worldview that is non-Western. The occasional Western feminist movement is characterized by a struggle to gain acceptance, political and economic power within conceptual and institutional structures that are essentially patriarchal, i.e., hierarchical, dichotomous, and non-integrated. Our ideas about gender are still essentially the same. Erdrich's construction of gender I assert is informed by an Indian worldview. The major difference between Western society and the occasional strides a feminist movement might make and Indian culture(s) is that for thousands of years Indians have based their social systems, however diverse, on woman-centered worldviews. And hence the woman at the center of every Erdrich story, the reaching back to the origin, to the mother, to June Kashpaw, to Fleur Pillager.

Erdrich's deconstruction of our notions of gender stems largely from a worldview of a social system where men are nurturing, passive, and women are self-defining, assertive and decisive. Her construction of gender stems from a social tradition in which the centrality of powerful women is necessary for social well-being. What is taken as radical in our culture, a work like Simone de Beauvoir's which posits that one is not born a woman, but becomes one, the deconstruction of the social construction of gender, is hardly a radical step for a writer whose cultural grounding does not have such a rigid ideology of woman. In chapter 3 I take a close look at Erdrich's creation of character, a creation which either intentionally or inadvertantly deconstructs our social

construction of gender and gender relations. Language is not only a mode of psychosomatic expression, but also a means of revolution and innovation, a means of conceptual revision. Erdrich revises our definitions and notions of gender.

Although Erdrich's novels are in a certain sense about the relationships between families, women occupy a much larger space than men. Sometimes that character takes on mythological attributes, as June Kashpaw does in Love Medicine and Fleur Pillager does in Tracks. It is Mary, Celestine, Sita and Dot in The Beet Queen who occupy the center and around whom all the characters' lives revolve. But it is not merely that women are central, but that many of the women in these novels are extraordinary women of overwhelming strength and endurance. In chapter 3, in a somewhat related way, I discuss how Erdrich deconstructs and dismantles our society's gender constructions. Erdich's shuffling around of traits that we see as "naturally" belonging to one sex or the other reveals to us the arbitrary nature of these distinctions. This can partially be attributed to the influence of Native American culture(s), for in many Native American cultures, there is not such a rigid assignment of gender roles as we find in Western gender ideology. Her characters defy this ideology: our system for categorizing men and women where men are identified with power, strength, destruction and aggression, and women are identified with power-lessness, weakness, creation, and passivity. We also find such subversions of our notions about gender in the writing of African-American writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison.

The substantive part of this dissertation is devoted less to political concerns such as gender constructs and gender roles and more to stylistic, formal and structural tendencies that I postulate are the artistic effects of the feminine. It is necessary here to address a seeming inconsistency in my approach to Erdrich, that is, my insistence on pointing out feminine traits in her writing style and structure and those aspects of her writing which are culturally influenced. Erdrich's writing contains elements and strategies which I would characterize as distinctly feminine, and only a reader fully sensitive to structures implicit in a feminine aesthetic could adequately elucidate this for the uninitiated reader. Some of the characteristics, many of which I have already mentioned, are the insistence of indeterminacy over settled meanings, plurality over duality, vocality,

anti-hierarchalism, the crossing of arbitrary boundaries, and openness against closure to name a few. And certainly, there are stylistic features — the folkloric texture, the magic realism — which I believe are culturally shaped strategies. But the two approaches are not fundamentally incompatible, for the writer under examination is both a woman and a Native American, and so, I will argue, her artistic expression is a dynamic interplay between these two consciousness-shaping factors. And apart from formalistic concerns, there are issues surrounding content and ideology, specifically, gender constructs, which I argue are culturally determined. Unfortunately, there is a split in feminist criticism between the semiotic perspective and social, political analysis. Critics tend to privilege one or the other and fail to relate them. I suppose it is risky to treat both formal properties of the text and characterization in a dissertation, where limits and perimeters are traditionally quite narrow and circumscribed around a singular critical issue. I ventured uninhibitedly between issues surrounding form, representation and language.

Another way in which Erdrich is attractive to a feminist critic is her explicit concern with language, its empowering nature and its relationship to identity. In chapter 7, I examine the relationship of women to power, language, silence and madness. The two characters in The Beet Queen, Adelaide and Sita are like throwbacks to the tradition of mad housewives found in writing by women that documented the pathology that afflicted women trapped in the domestic sphere, two characters who are a foil to Celestine James and Mary Adare in the same novel. Both Sita and Adelaide fall into the romantic trap, the map laid out for young women in Western culture which promises at the end domestic bliss. It is replayed in the fairy tales that we read to our daughters, in ballads and children's rhymes, and in the Cindarella story that has its avatars in current popular literature and film. For Edrich's female characters entrapment is quite literal: Adelaide finds herself in a large birdcage and Sita ends up in a mental institution. Like the characters in many mad housewife novels, e.g., Ballantyne's Norma Jean the Termite Queen, Shulman's Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen, Sita and Adelaide are not only trapped in domestic space, but also in self-consciousness as it related to their beauty. It is no coincidence that in The Beet Queen Sita is described by one of the reservation locals as looking like a "fucking queen."

Both ultimately fall into madness, a madness marked by willed silence. Their silence, I set out to show, is a familiar one, one women have known for centuries, a hysterical silence. Cixous speaks of women, madness and silence, noting that women are alien from speech, are aphonic. Their tongues, she says, are cut off, their heads decapitated. What talks is their body and men are not attuned to the body, they cannot hear it.

In chapter 2 I discuss the issue of subjectivity and how the idea of a fragmented self and identity are central to the understanding of Erdrich's characters. For Erdrich's characters the struggle is with the self as an autonomous and complete identity and the self as part of a group. For most of her characters, the issue is one of personal, familial and cultural identity, a problem which stems from the collision of cultures, two opposing worldviews, the shamanic and the Catholic, the western and the non-western. The result for some of the characters who are suspended between these two worlds is confusion, contradiction, alienation, and in some cases, dissolution. This problem surrounding subjectivity is a defining characteristic of writing by women, but with Erdrich the problem of a split or fractured identity afflicts both men and women, as we seen in Nector Kashpaw in Love Medicine and, more terrifyingly, in Pauline in Tracks. The struggle with identity is a characteristic of minority writers as well. Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God deal with the search for the self.

In chapter 4, I will explore how memory, history and change figure into Erdrich's work and how they affect the trajectory of her novels. As Erdrich's writing moves forward chronologically, as we move from one novel to the next, we actually move backward temporally. Her first novel, Love Medicine, begins in 1981 and then jumps back to 1934, and then loops around up through 1981 and finishes in 1984. The second novel, The Beet Queen starts in 1932 and the third novel, Tracks, starts in 1912. Furthermore, two of the novels, The Beet Queen and Love Medicine overlap in time and include many of the same characters. Erdrich parodies and underscores our notions of intertextuality, present in all texts. Intertextuality (*intertextualite*) was a term which Kristeva exported and the term has been met with some confusion. The term does not refer to matters of influence of one writer upon another, nor does it refer to the sources of a literary work.

Intertextuality describes a transposition of one or more systems of signs into another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position. Any text is a permutation of texts, i.e., in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another. Intertextuality implies that the text is socially and historically bound and considers the text within (the text of) society and history. I use Kristeva's notion of intertextuality in a somewhat limited sense, that is, that the three novels, though they stand as three separate works, at points intersect and remind us of the interplay of signs, utterances and semiotic praxis. But Kristeva's theory of intertextuality requires an advanced knowledge of linguistics and is of little concern here.

Alienation from language, having a language system imposed upon us which is not our own, is also a concern to all the Native American cultures. Not only was their language ultimately displaced by English, but elements of their language were appropriated and bastardized to suit the needs of the oppressor. In this way Native American writers find themselves in a position similar to Hispanic writers in the Americas and African American writers. In an essay entitled "Living By The Word" the poet and novelist Alice Walker wrote of the position of those who have had their own language stripped from them. For it is language that reveals and validates one's existence, and to attempt to conceive oneself in another culture's language is mortally damaging, for one's self-understanding will be obscured and one's self-reflection will inevitably be reduced to caricature. This concern about language is one of the critical issues in Erdrich's third novel, Tracks.

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In chapter 6, entitled "Magical Realism and the Subversion of Narrative," I look at the use of narrative strategies that I consider subversive, e.g., the use of magical realism in her novels. The use of magic realism is about the constraints of rendering a life in fiction, especially when characters' lives and the events that surround their lives are sometimes incompatible with the

facts of human existence. It is nearly impossible for a realistic novel to be written which defies our sexual ideology because the social realities are staples of the realistic novel. Magic realism, used also by many Latin American writers such as Fuentes and Marquez, is intermittent as used in the novels of recent American writers such as Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston. The use of this technique can also be attributed to the importance of magic and mysticism within their own cultures. Certainly, magic realism has the power to convey complex truths unavailable to realism. So much of American literature is rife with conflict, the tensions that exist between coexisting and disparate cultures, that magic realism serves suitably to convey the otherwise inexplicable dissonances inherent in much of the American experience.

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Erdrich's universe appeals to the feminist sensibility because it is devoid of hierarchies: it contains decentered narratives, each told from shifting points of view, perspectives that sometimes contradict each other without any authoritative resolution, with no privileged point of view to reconcile or mediate. In The Beet Queen and Love Medicine there is the interjection of a disembodied voice spliced in at various points in the narrative, but this voice does not serve as an organizing force or framework to organize the disparate voices of the narrative; rather it is merely another perspective on equal footing with the others. In chapter 7, I look at what I called the aesthetic of marginalization we find in Erdrich, a decentralization of the narrative, an off-centering that often characterizes the literature of women, another mark we recognize as the nature of the exiled. I think that Erdrich's reference to Moby Dick in the Nector Kashpaw section of Love Medicine is a pointed one. It underscores how a book like that, which has been deeply planted into the American collective unconscious, fails to encompass or speak to a large part of the American experience. It brings into sharper relief Nector's status as a marginalized person. The Native American experience is one of being exiled, a perverse irony of being exiled in your own land. This also carries connotations for the idea of an American canon, the dividing up of major

works and minor works. What is implicit in Nector's attempt to identify with Ishmael? Do we need to reconsider what we declare as universal in character? Is white male experience to be equated with the human experience? Perhaps also implicit is that we need to broaden our notions of an American aesthetic, a position slowly leaking into the American academy, but which still finds much resistence from many quarters. But the aesthetic of marginalization does not only refer to an off-centeredness, the fact that there is no single organizing consciousness in her novels (the eye of the camera moves around, back and forth, laterally: no center exists), but also with the type of characters she chooses to write about. In Love Medicine we have a collage of fragmented beings: orphans, alcoholics, Vietnam veterans who have lost their minds, people who have lost their lands. These disparate voices flow through the novel like the waters of life, sometimes running countercurrent to each other, sometimes running smoothly and patiently, at other times rushing madly and violently.

Naturally, many feminist issues overlap with issues of Native American culture, or any subculture that struggles against a dominant culture: the issues of classism, racism, and sexism are braided. We are just beginning to see a great outpouring of American literature from writers within subcultures, African-American, Asian-American, Chicana, an outpouring which is slowly moving its way into the canon of American literature. The core of American concerns, what gives a novel its "Americanness," the qualities of American literature, have changed dramatically over the past 50 years.

My decision to choose Louise Erdrich as a dissertation subject was prompted by several factors. I was attracted initially by the sheer beauty of her language and the power of her storytelling. Erdrich's spare line delivers oceanic energy. Once I got past the language, I found women characters who were vastly unfamiliar to the pages of literature, the likes of which we rarely find rendered even by the most feminist of authors. I was struck by their strength, fearlessness, earthiness, endurance, self-respect and defiance.

I suppose a certain portion of the drive to write about Erdrich was the need to explore regions that have not been explored before by the critical community, meeting Malcolm Cowley's exhortation that the first function of a critic is to select works of art that are new and infrequently discussed. Such is the case with Louise Erdrich. Her first novel, Love Medicine, was published in 1984, and there has been an appallingly small response from critical circles. But there are signs that she is slowly beginning to move into the canon: rnore and more frequently her name can be found on syllabi for courses on contemporary literature, and since the mid-eighties her short stories have been published in anthologies of modern literature. And I hope that this dissertation will serve as a catalyst for a dialogue on an author who is already an important voice in American literature. I hope that the foregoing examination of her work reveals a writer who belongs in a tradition of marginalized writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston. The incorporation of unconventional discursive modes is all the more pressing to women minority writers because they experience marginalization with greater intensity than their male counterparts, for they are the eternally marginalized. There is no dream of returning to a homeland; women everywhere, at all times, are excluded from the dominant culture and dominant discursive practices. Nor do they share the experience of their Anglo sisters. The experience of double marginalization certainly creates a unique artistic identity that must reject privileged conventions, conventions that are not able to grasp the complexity and irreducibility of a minority woman's experience. The use of subversive practices (metafiction, gender deconstruction, antilinearity, magical realism, inversion of the center/margin dichotomy), makes us reconsider our received realities and enlarges our understanding of the human experience.

CHAPTER I

READING LOUISE ERDRICH AS METAFICTION

In this chapter, I set out to examine how Louise Erdrich's fiction is metafictional. This metafictional practice manifests itself in two ways: 1)it is commentary on the "old plots" of sentimental novels in which either marriage or death was the final destiny of the female protagonist, and 2) it is an anti-narrative, i.e., it frustrates automatic application of narrative codes to the text, requiring us to see them as codes.

Perhaps Erdrich's writing is less conspicuously metafictional than writing by other women who use metafictional techniques, for example, Doris Lessing in The Golden Notebook where the protagonist is a writer. Metafiction is a transgressive mode, for when a writer talks about narrative within narrative, the difficulties embedded in the act of reading, the difficulties of interpretation, her fiction at once becomes metafictional. Metafiction can be a powerful tool for feminist critique, for to reveal how the meanings and values of the world have been constructed and, therefore, how they can be changed, is a feminist project. Metafiction is transgressive because it unsettles traditional distinctions between fiction and non-fiction, reality and fiction, and exposes the arbitrary nature of boundaries. It can be argued, however, that metafiction can create boundaries in that it draws attention to the frame, to what sets off fiction from other forms of discourse. The boundaries of a system are not inherent characteristics of the system or the things in the system, but rather are put there by the person who is studying the system. Erdrich repeatedly draws attention to the arbitrariness of boundaries, blurring the lines between the three novels, echoing the inscription of one novel in the dialogue of a character within that novel. Metafiction destabilizes the conventions of realism and thus serves as a means of social and political critique and also as a form of literary criticism.[1]

Although none of her characters are writers, in The Beet Queen there is overt reading. Celestine makes several references to the romances that she is reading and notes how real life falls short of her romances. Here it is important to clarify terms. The term romance is used quite a bit here, and describes romantic novels, moreso than the strict usage as a genre, set against the novel. Richard Chase defines the romance as having "qualities of the picturesque and the heroic, an assumed freedom from the ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude, development, and continuity; a tendency toward melodrama and idyl...the power to express dark and complex truths unavailabe to realism" (12-13). My definition is more specific but would still fit within Chase's broader definition. When I refer to romance here, I am speaking of the type of popular literature aimed at women, the melodramatic, sentimental and dime-store novels produced for mass consumption. And this is certainly what Celestine is referring to when she speaks of the "romances" and "love magazines" that she reads. Certainly Celestine's own life stands in stark contrast to the plots laid for women in romances: she has no desire to keep Karl Adare around after she has her child. Celestine is momentarily confused because she has been told that women are supposed to be swept off their feet and that sexual desire is inseparable from love and romance. But Celestine rejects the prescribed behaviour for women by recognizing that her libidinal drives are separate from her feelings about Karl, something the romances, she says, had not prepared her for. He proposes marriage assuming that is what she wants ("you want me to pop the question,") especially since she is pregnant with his child, but she rejects his offer (136). The romances had never prepared her for pregnancy either: "In the love books a baby never comes of it all, so again I am not prepared. I do not expect the weakness in my legs or the swelling ankles. The tales of burning love never mention how I lie awake, alone in the heat of an August night, and panic" (139-140). This piece of feminist metafiction is a form of feminist literary criticism, a revision and re-reading of the romance, entering the old plot in order to write beyond it, beyond the earlier endings, the ones that ended "before the woman came home worn out from cutting beef into steaks with an electric saw" (136). The nexus between feminist metafiction and feminst literary criticism has been noted by critics such as Elaine Showalter and Cora Kaplan.

Showalter noted a "vital interaction" between feminist critics and feminist writers, that artists and critics are clearly part of the same literary movement, stimulated by the energies released and identified by the women's movement, coming out of the same cultural matrix, and engaged in the same tasks of revision and rediscovery(437). Cora Kaplan notices that in the seventies a link between the development of feminist criticism and "the new renaissance of women's writing," and a "unified and dialectical cultural practice that spoke into and out of the imaginative project" (15-23).

Certainly it could be said that The Beet Queen is such a questioning of previous plots. Celestine's comparison of her life to the lives of characters in the romances she reads echoes the protagonists of other feminist fiction, such as the character in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing who asks: "Did you believe that stuff when you were little? I did, I thought I was really a princess and I'd end up living in a castle" (66-67). Or Jane Clifford in Godwin's Odd Woman who "ransacks novels for answers to life" to find that survival means avoiding "already-written stories" (29). Or like Jane Gray of Drabble's Waterfall who attempts to find understanding of her affair with her cousin's husband in "old-fashioned" Victorian novels, but only finds that their punitive morality would have suffocated her" (138). Or Mira of Marilyn French's The Women's Room tries to find "books she could find herself and her problems in. There were none...nothing helped. Like the person who gets fat because they eat unnourishing foods and so is always hungry and so is always eating, she drowned in words that could not teach her to swim" (29). Lessing's Martha Quest reads "like a famished person," hoping to find self-understanding in literature, but only finds "a gap between her self and the past" (200, 210). Erdrich's Mary Adare too finds no stories from the past to model her life on: "I'd lost trust in the past. They were part of a fading pattern that was beyond understanding, and brought me no comfort" (21). Mary takes to reading books on mysticism instead. Celestine too looks to literature, the romances and "love magazines" but finds a great disparity between her life and their descriptions of life: "In the love magazines, when passion holds sway, men don't fall down and roll on the floor and lay there like dead. But Karl does that" (134). She acknowledges "the missing areas of books" (132).

The Beet Queen undermines the traditional romance by direct commentary on the old plots, but it is also subversive in other ways. The primary relationship of the novel is not heterosexual romance but female friendship, the life-long friendship between Celestine and Mary, and eventually Dot. Wallace and Karl remain peripheral. Throughout their lives Mary and Celestine are mutually sustaining, and being motherless, even essential to their respective development, as Sula and Nel were in Morrison's Sula. [2] Female friendship is the means of self-definition for Mary and Celestine, providing the (m)other who embodies and reflects an essential aspect of the self. A school of psychoanalytic thought, object-relations theory, has contributed greatly to the understanding of female development which Freud failed to address. Object relations theory stresses the relation of the psyche to the social context in which it develops. The social contexts for most infants consist almost exclusively of the mother. Because the mother identifies with the infant of her own sex, she responds differently to her female infant, and this sort of identification makes it difficult for the female child to establish definite ego boundaries. Hence, women tend to define themselves relationally and also retain both the desire and capacity for fusion and the more specific desire for union with the mother. Heterosexual love partially fulfilles this need for men, but not at all for women. Identification with another woman is then crucial for the acheivement of full identity. What Mary and Celestine liked about each other was what neither could find in Sita: strength and solidity. When they meet for the first time there is an odd sort of mystical kinship.

> Mary and Celestine smiled into each other's eyes. I could see that it was like two people meeting in a crowd, who knew each other from a long time before. And what was also odd, they looked suddenly alike. It was only when they were together. You'd never notice it when they weren't. Celestine's hair was a tarnished red brown. Her skin was olive, her eyes burning black. Mary's eyes were light brown and her hair was dark and lank. Together, like I said, they looked similar. It wasn't even their build. Mary was short and stocky, while Celestine was tall. It was something else, either in the way they acted or the way they talked. Maybe it was a common sort of fierceness. (33)

Their bond has oddness about it because their story is a new story. Both are eager to construct

new stories and new lives apart from other female precursors. In Mary's case it is her mother, Adelaide, who was excessively male-dependent, and in Celestine's, her sister Isabel who married a Sioux and ended up dying a violent death. In fact Mary metaphorically needs to kill her mother and does so in her imagination (32, 16). In fact it is only Sita, the one who attempts to live her life according to the plots laid out in romance, who ends up dead at the end of the novel. Women in romances either end up dead or condemned to a living death, like Sasha in Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen who "wallowed in fable, searching for guidance" and "read every romance as a parable for the future," only to find herself "at thirty...without income or skill, dependent on a man and a fading skin..." (293). Marriage is the one plot held out to woman, the only means of success or survival, the rite that marks her transition into adulthood. A proper marriage (forgive the seeming allusion to Doris Lessing's novel, though it would , coincidentally, be appropos here) symbolizes that successful transition into adulthood and society, and death symbolizes her failure to complete that passage. But death is also a reflection of the limited imagination that cannot envision a woman's life outside of marriage. Both Celestine and Mary, though they momentarily lapse, manage to escape falling into the romantic trap. Like Hardy's Tess, Celestine allows herself to fall for the vile seducer (Karl), but she does not end up a sacrifice. How many stories in our canon of modern fiction tell of women who allowed themselves to be seduced and then died as a result? Surely there are too many bodies to count. Jane Clifford, the protagonist in Godwin's The Odd Woman describes it as the "Emma Bovary syndrome—literature's graveyard positively choked with women who...'get in trouble' (commit adultery, have sex without marriage; think of committing adultery, or having sex without marriage) and thus, according to the literary convention of the time, must die" (302). This novel also subverts the sentimental novel in its treatment of sex. Celestine's sexual encounter with Karl is quite prosaic and a stark contrast to the covert and delicate treatment of sex in Victorian novels. The Beet Queen has traces of the sentimental novel with its focus on female characters and most importantly the female as potential victim of exploitative male sexual desire, but this serves as a background for subversion. Mary and Celestine's friendship outlast Mary's foray into romance with Russell and Celestine's

with Karl, and even after Sita's two marriages, it is Mary and Celestine that she turns to at the end for help.[3]

The image of flight, either flying of fleeing, has been a recurring theme for women writers who feel trapped by the conventions of romance and realism. It has been used recurrently as a metaphor for women's writing, signifying the desire to escape the polarity between women and artist. And, as Helene Cixous has noted, in French, the verb "voler" means also to steal, which in the context of women's relationship to writing, she suggests, connotes the stealing of the language or stealing away the time to write. In this way flight too is a subversion of traditional plots. The other two major female characters in The Beet Queen whom I have yet to mention, Adelaide and Dot, both resort to flight.

Adelaide, living in a house owned by the married man with whom she has been having an affair, finds herself, upon his death, homeless, with three children and only her marketable good figure and looks. But even her good figure and looks are only a tenuous means of support, for as Mary remembers "my mother thought [in the Cities], with her figure and good looks, she could find work in a fashionable store...but she didn't know she was pregnant. She didn't know how much things really cost, or the hard facts of Depression. After six months the money ran out. We were desperate" (7). Unprepared for a life of financial independence, Adelaide finds herself in abject motherhood and overwhelmed by its demands, clearly never having imagined this kind of ending for herself. She seeks escape by way of a stunt pilot at an airshow, ditching her three kids. Mary remembers:

> Without a backward look, without a word, with no warning and no hesitation, she elbowed through the people collected at the base of the grandstand and stepped into the cleared space around the pilot...the plane lurched forward, lifted over the low trees, gained height. The Great Omar circled the field in a low swoop, and I saw my mother's long red crinkly hair spring from its tight knot and float free in an arc that seemed to reach out and tangle around his shoulders. (12)

The passage has all the trappings of romance: the dashing pilot (the anagram of his name is, incidentally, amor), the helpless woman, the rescue, the imagery of the hair unknotting itself and

flowing free, all of which is undercut by the brutal realism of Mary's reportage. Adelaide did, after all, leave three children. But in the old plots things end happily; there are no victims. This is a commentary on the mythology surrounding motherhood, which has for so long been held out to women, only in the context of marriage, as the fulfillment of their destiny. This is a demythologizing of motherhood, the "sacred calling," an institution which demands of women selflessness rather than self-realization, and the primacy of relation to others rather than the creation of the self. In our culture, the archetypal Mother is a danger for women: it is a symbol of a source of unending love, understanding and forgiveness and tenderness in a world in which survival is dependent on aggression, cunning, intelligence and disdain for human weakness.

Later in The Beet Queen, Adelaide's granddaughter, Dot, attempts to escape the plot laid out for her in the same fashion as Adelaide—flight. Where her mother Celestine reads romances, Dot takes to writing, and writing for her is a way of combatting the old plot. Though only brief reference is made to Dot's writing, it is significant in that like for so many protagonists in feminist fiction, writing is a means of liberation, a means of fighting back against prescribed behavior and ideology. To Dot the writing is sacred and secret, and the small gold key with which she locks up her diaries gives it an air of subversion. Wallace notes that Dot's writing grows proportionately with her anger:

> Dot grew angrier each year, frightening us, making havoc, causing danger to herself...she smoked in her room, filling the windowsills with stubs, and kept secret diaries that she locked with small gold keys...it wasn't hard to guess the sort of things she wrote in the books...she was persecuted, miserable, plotting her revenge...she filled boxes with papers. Her diaries collected. (301)

Dot tries desperately to imagine a different plot for her life, and tells her fantasies to her Uncle Wallace, none of which include marriage or motherhood. She imagines she would be a world traveler or a movie star, that she would own a restaurant chain or drive trucks, or she would be an Olympic athlete or a famous writer. She steps out of the conventional repetoire of activities to

which women are limited. Dot is a marginalized character, rebellious and unpopular, and it is for her lack of fear about being "different" that her Uncle Wallace admires her: "She was not afraid to be different and this awed me" (302). She refuses to be "feminine" in our traditional sense of the word— weak, submissive, passive, and dainty. She is an imposing physical and psychological presence, and she does not apologize for it. She acknowledges to Wallace that her marginal status is difficult and admits that she has moments where she wishes she were plucked up out of the margin, made over into a cover-girl beauty, and adored for her femininity. This admission propels Wallace into creating a plot by which Dot would be reintegrated into society, and describes his role in it curiously enough by reference to that guidebook for integrating and initiating of people into society — the children's story. "I would be like the godmother in a children's story, grant one wish" (304). Wallace then plans a scheme by which Dot could gain acknowledgement and acceptance by gaining admission into one of the rites of womanhood—he enters her in a beauty contest. He imagines "Dot ascending foil-covered steps, her face bright, the tiara catching spotlights and sunlight...I saw Dot's eyes...running over with tears of shock, of pride" (304). He imagines that if she felt beautiful she would be confident, be inspired. He wants to transform her from the hard-faced and feared Dot, to a soft and sweet Queen Wallacette: "But I knew once the crown dazzled and drew attention to her sense of command, her unusual bearing, and, yes, her beauty, the town would see it too. Girls would envy her, boys would flock" (306). Wallace unwittingly is trying to recreate Sita's story, luring Dot into the dead-end of female self-consciousness, making her over into currency for patriarchal economy, an object of exchange. Dot goes along with the plan until the day of the parade when she begins to realize that this is a set up, for she starts, "facing up to reality" (332). Taught to wave like a "windshield wiper," she begins to feel the death of objectification. Her anger grows and she begins to feel both "dangerous" and "desperate." She thinks to herself that she doesn't have to go through with this, that there must be some way out. She contemplates feigning illness, a "massive convulsion" (illness has long

been a way out for women), but decides against it. She recognizes a pattern:

> There is a thread beginning with my grandmother
> Adelaide and traveling through my father and
> arriving at me. That thread is flight. (335)

Dot, like her grandmother, makes a dash to the plane without a backward glance, without a word of warning, determined to escape. She manages to get on board, but once in the air, she is overwhelmed by the unfamiliar feeling. In flight, she feels "too light, too unconnected" (336). She begs to be brought down, and imagines, oddly enough, that she is heading inexorably to her death. It is ironic that she assumes she's going to die, as if that were the only alternative to flight: "I decide, when we finally descend, to die with my eyes wide open. So I see everything, the sudden magnification as we swoop, the rushing earth, the carnival and fairgrounds like a painting that smears and then suddenly focuses as we slow" (336). She does not die, but lands and finds her mother waiting for her. She and her mother walk home into the open night air, black and moonless. The idea of flight as an escape from the old plot is undercut by the ending of the story, the "harsh and awful" reality of her life. The narrative ends, ambiguously, with Dot and her mother Celestine resigned to what seems a living death, passively waiting, a stark contrast to Karl, whose car they passed on the way home, poised "for a smooth exit" (338). They, unlike Karl, have nowhere to escape to, just as Adelaide went from one type of imprisonment (institutionalized motherhood) to another (in her birdcage with Omar). Mocked by her own failure to escape, to create a new ending, we hear a tone of resignation in Dot's narration:

> I want to lean into her the way wheat leans into wind,
> but instead I walk upstairs and lie down in my bed alone.
> I watch the ceiling for a long while, letting the night
> deepen around me, letting all the distant sounds of cars
> and people cease, letting myself go forward on a piece of
> whirling bark until I'm almost asleep. (338)

Both Adelaide's ending and Dot's ending are impossible endings as Erdrich makes clear in undermining both attempts at escape. As Ella Price, the protagonist of Fanny Bryant's Ella

Price's Journal, complains: "You just can't do that. Just walk out, without a job, without any knowledge of the world, leaving the children. It just can't be done" (91). Does The Beet Queen then change the old plot at either the level of plot, language or meaning? Or is it like the pattern of the sweater that Mary sews for Dot, a pattern that Mary and Celestine trace together:

> Mary doesn't understand until I trace the pattern with my finger, trying to find an exit. She begins to search along with me, through the tangle of pathways across the chest, down the undersides of arms, across the shoulders. But we can discover no way out. (277)

One of the more subtle ways in which Erdrich's work is metafictional is the way in which it calls attention to our hermeneutical practices and problematizes them, and this is treated both formally (by the planting of conflicting narrative codes), and thematically. As Catherine Rainwater has pointed out, Erdrich's fiction contains conflicting narrative codes, an issue which I will explore shortly.[4] This sort of writing practice illuminates the nexus between reading, interpretation, deconstructionism and feminism. It is a writing that is subversive and is attractive to feminist critics who have found value in deconstructionist thought, for it is open to and invites a deconstructionist reading, what Jacques Derrida would describe as a post-modern anti-narrative text.

Before I go any further, I will pause for a moment to clarify my terms. When I refer to a deconstructionist reading, I am alluding to the "deconstruction" of a text. If deconstruction is an undoing which manifests itself in the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text, then a reading that analyses the specificity of a text's critical difference from itself and helps that text to articulate that difference from itself which it knows but cannot say, describes the deconstructionist project. The deconstructive act is set in opposition to the interpretive act. The problem with interpretation from the deconstructionist standpoint (and hence, feminist standpoint) is that interpretation seeks to reveal an underlying meaning, a reality distorted by the power of those able to construct meaning in the first place.

The deconstructionist project is attractive to feminists because its task is to unsettle assertions of meaning in order to reveal the modes of power for which they are a vehicle and to force

open a space for the possibility of countermeanings. The deconstructionist project then is inviting to feminist literary critics for its subversive stance toward fixed meaning claims, subverting authority and in turn empowering the powerless and the marginal. Deconstructionists, like feminists, share a distaste for categorization. Interpretation assumes that there is a meaning to be uncovered, that which can be discovered. The genealogical project, which has heavily influenced much of contemporary French feminist theory, finds that the world is a place of flux and discord, and as Foucault remarks, it offers no legible face and is indifferent to our need for a resting place in the truth. The genealogist asserts that there is more to being than knowing, and regards the act of interpretation as a false imposition of unities, a striving toward an all-encompassing picture of reality, a manipulation of particularities in the service of meaning, a strategy regarded as dangerous by feminists. Interpretation relentlessy pursued, most feminist critics would say, conveniently would tune out dissonances that would threaten its unities. Luce Irigaray calls for a disruption of such imperialistic strategies, a "jamming of the theoretical machinery itself" (78). For the French feminists, all unities and coherences are forced, the artifacts of the analysis rather than the analyzed. However, to reject the interpretist stance in favor of the genealogical is to set oneself up against a deeply pervasive masculinist compulsion toward knowing. As Helene Cixous points out:

> ...even at the moment of uttering a sentence, admitting a notion of 'being,' a question of being, an ontology, we are already seized by a certain kind of masculine desire, the desire that mobilizes philosophical discourse. As soon as the question "what is it?' is posed, from the moment a question is put, as soon as a reply is sought, we are already caught up in masculine interrogation. .. ... And this interrogation precisely involves the work of signification: 'What is it? Where is it?' A work of meaning, 'This means that,' the predicative distribution that always at the same time orders the constitution of meaning. And while meaning is being constituted it only gets constituted in a movement in which one of the terms of the couple is destroyed in favor of the other. (45)

Erdrich's writing is inviting for the feminist critic whose project is the decentering of power and meaning. If the act of interpretation is itself a masculinist compulsion to order, manipulate and

control meaning, then interpretation itself is reactionary and a feminist issue.

It seems that one of the problems of Reader Response Criticism is that it has become obsessed with the nature of reading so much that it no longer is writing about literature being produced today. It is especially troubling in light of the fact that for the first time in history, we have such a great outpouring of literature by women, and women and men from Latin American countries, African countries and so on. Very little critical work has been done on writers like Louise Erdrich and Maxine Hong Kingston, while there is a proliferation of literature about reading practices. And so, though I do not want to dwell too long in the rarified air of metacritical space, it is necessary for me to recognize that reading practices are political, and narrative codes are cultural, and I wish to explore this briefly before I get into Erdrich's imbrication of such issues onto her fiction and the dynamic between feminist criticism and feminist fiction.

Though reader-oriented theory has been attacked for depoliticizing the study of literature, we need to acknowledge that there are plenty of political presuppositions behind our reading practices. And, such an acknowledgement could be quite helpful in a feminist reading. Every reader approaches a literary work from within a cultural framework, a class, a gender. No reader reads in a vacuum; all readers approach a text with experiences, notions, philosophies and prejudices as individual as their thumbprints, making the very act of interpretation a political act. Erdrich's refrain, "the story comes up different every time," also says something about the act of interpretation, that interpretation, by its very nature, at some point blurs into and becomes authorship. The story, which is retold from generation to generation in oral cultures, is remade in the process. An analogue to this is found in the relationship between the writer and the critic, the story and the interpretation of the story, which upon completion, renders a different story from the original. Every interpretative act has a creative dimension, and when we interpret a story, we create a new one, and so it must, by necessity, come up different. In our practice as critics and readers, we have been trained to glean certain details, depending upon our hermeneutic orientation, and ignore or erase others. But the primary thrust of this chapter is to look at how Erdrich's work could be read as a metafiction, that is to say, that it is a fiction that questions and exposes issues

surrounding fictionality, that comments upon reading practices, writing practices, interpretative practices, and its own narrative conventions. I will begin first with how this is treated thematically, and then I will examine how this issue is treated formally by the planting of conflicting narrative codes which frustrate narrativity, "the process by which a perceiver actively constructs a story from the fictional data provided by any narrative medium" (60).

Erdrich's metafictional practice comments on the difficulties of interpretation: the problems surrounding interpretation become thematically embedded in Erdrich's second novel, The Beet Queen, in the episode in the schoolyard revolving around the impression in the snow. The facial impression in the snow and the three different interpretations offered up for it underscore the difficulties of interpretation and the arbitrary nature of meaning. The incident occurs when Mary is at school and goes head first down the slide in the schoolyard. She lands at full impact, face first. The impact leaves an impression in the ice. A crowd gathers at the impression, and Mary is the first one to offer up a reading of it, a reading in which she finds the shadowy likeness of her brother Karl and connects or correllates all the details in the ice with pieces of her memory: "His cheeks were hollowed out, his eyes dark pits. His mouth was held in a firm line of pain and the hair on his forehead had formed wet spikes, the way it always did when he slept or had a fever" (39). What the Father sees with unwavering conviction is the Son of God: "Christ's Dying Passion," he said, "Christ's face formed in the ice as surely as on Veronica's veil" (40). And everyone else in the town, and from miles around, sees the image of Christ as they come to kneel next to the impression and leave rosaries. But that is not all. And it is here in this chapter, Celestine's, that Sister Leopolda appears (who does not make an appearance again until the publication of Tracks). Pauline/Sister Leopolda arrived in Argus (1912) several years before Mary and Karl (1932), but her narrative doesn't begin until the third and last novel. The reference to Sister Leopolda brings us outside momentarily of the universe of this novel and forward (and backward) to Tracks so that events loop around and tangle. We'll remember all too clearly the

excessive self-flagellation of Pauline:

> The one thing they never write about is how Sister Leopolda is found several nights after Mary's accident. She is kneeling at the foot of the slide with her arms bare, scourging herself past the elbows with dried thistles, drawing blood. After that she is sent somewhere to recuperate. (42)

But Celestine does not have Leopolda's conviction and try though she may, all she can see in the ice is a "smashed spot" (44). So here we have three interpretations, conflicting and irresolvable. And Erdrich will not offer us a way out of this hermenuetical impasse. She leads us away from an either/or type of thinking toward a both/and acceptance. There is no omniscient, objective view that will resolve it into a satisfactorily singular reading. Such a narrative strategy affirms the perpectival nature of reality and insists on the totality of collective experience. It is a narrative strategy in which every detail is important, not a single angle of vision, but every line of interpretation. This kind of narrative strategy, its openness, invites the reader in to interpret for herself; author does not mean authority here. Here the reader is engaged in the process of making knowledge. It is no coincidence, I am sure, that Argus, the name of the fictional town in which The Beet Queen is situated, refers to a character from Greek mythology who had a thousand eyes.

And Erdrich's characters ruminate over the slipperiness of interpretation. Difficulties over interpretation surround one's frame of reference, and this is a fact that Albertine Johnson hits upon in the first chapter of Love Medicine. She comes across the phrase, "patient abuse" in a book she is reading. Albertine acknowledges to herself that the phrase has two meanings depending on your experience, and your experience will direct you toward your interpretative stance. This politicizes the notion of interpretation, stripping it of any claims of neutrality, reminding us that we choose an interpretive framework, and each system has its attendent presumptions. Indeed, our reading practices have been conditioned, and we are trained to see details that work within our system. To the average nursing student, "patient abuse" has to do with the mistreatment of the hospitalized. To a Native American, a woman, to Albertine, this first brings to

mind something quite different: abuse that was "slow and tedious, requiring long periods of dormancy, living in the blood like hepatitis." Its meaning becomes clear when Albertine goes home after learning about June's death and confronts her family's desperation and violence. Albertine's notion about patient abuse is reaffirmed from watching King suffer from his mother's premature and unnatural death, his struggle against alcholism, and watching King's wife bear the brunt of his rage and sorrow.

A chapter later, Marie Kashpaw has nearly the same recognition. Holding a pair of rosarie beads in her hands, she is reminded of the stones at the bottom of a stream, rolled, pushed, lolled around incessantly by the waves of the water. The effect of the waves against the stones is erosion. Marie considers that to many, the effect of erosion is to create smooth, polished stones — to many people, a "kindness." But the erosion is just that to Marie - erosion, that after a while, grinds the stones down to nothing. Given her life's experiences, the abuse that she has patiently had to tolerate from a disloyal husband, the punitive nuns, from the indignities of poverty, she sees this picture from the stone's point of view: a cruel and relentless wearing down.
She interprets the smoothness differently.

Throughout Erdrich's novels, both Erdrich's characters and we as readers confront the difficulty of meaning, the slipperiness of it, the importance of context in the construction of meaning, and, finally, we confront the irreducibility of narrative to meaning. We resign ourselves to the meanings present, the meanings that conflict with one another without resolution. The text never congeals meanings.

Having examined how the concerns over interpretation are treated thematically, I will now look at how this issue is treated formally. As mentioned earlier, Erdrich's work could be described as a post-modern anti-narrative as conflicting narrative codes frustrate our application of a code to these texts. Such practice is metafictional because it forces the reader to draw her attention away from the construction of a diegesis as we typically do in our reading practice. By frustrating this sort of closure, the text brings the codes themselves to the foreground of our critical attention, forcing us to see them as codes rather than a priori. This sort of metafictional

gesture, the anti-narrative, problematizes the entire process of narration and interpretation for the reader. According to Roland Barthes, the interpretation of both historical discourses and fictional discourses involves the construction of a diegesis which is recreated by the interpreter with every event in order and all relationships as clear as possible. The reader's desire to know are the sources of what Barthes has called (in S/Z) the hermeneutic codes in narrative, or narrative codes.[5] These codes, like all codes, are cultural, and thus shaped by our experience. This is what Erdrich comments on thematically. But what I am focusing on here is the formal and structural expression of this, the anti-narrative form.

Catherine Rainwater's article has been the most insightful critical work done on Erdrich since the publication of the first novel (406). She is on the mark in finding within Erdrich's text competing paradigms, or narrative codes. Rainwater finds in her reading of Erdrich antithetical strands within associative fields. Barthes defines "associative fields" as supratextual organizations of notations which impose a certian notion of structure" (288). The competing paradigms fall into two main categories, Western-European and Native American, and within each are various determinants, e.g., Christianity, Shamanism, ceremonial time, industrial time, nuclear family arrangements, tribal kinship, and so on. Their simultaneous presence, she asserts, frustrates the reader's attempt to locate a consistent interpretive framework. Indeed, it could be argued that the dichotomy itself could be seen as an interpretive framework. Rainwater deserves credit for uncovering these tensions in Erdrich's work, but I would go even further by identifying this practice as a metafictional gesture, an idea that Rainwater does not address in her article. I furthermore would add that inextricably tied up in the built-in frustrations of interpretation are the very feminist concerns with plurality over duality, the yolking together of differences over exclusion. I don't think that these hermenuetical difficulties can or should be read out of the context of larger feminist concerns, especially given the many other critical issues that also invite a feminist reading.

Rainwater finds that all three novels are torn by conflicting codes. She first identifies it in Love Medicine. In the first chapter we are introduced by an omniscient voice to June Kashpaw,

and throughout this chapter there are patterns of Christian references. It is Easter weekend, she is eating eggs and drinking "angel wings." She goes through a series of rebirths. All these references cue the reader toward an interpretative framework that would shape our understanding of the story, so that when we read that after she dies June "walked over [the snow] like water and came home," we assume "home" means a Christian heaven. But this reading is undone by the presence of a Native American paradigm brought into play by several references to an animistic universe (in the Native American worldview there is not such a distinct split between material and spiritual). We may now read the passage to mean that "home" is the reservation and June's spirit had returned there to mingle among familiar things of the world, such as the deer that visits her husband Gordie.

In Tracks, the same conflict manifests itself in the twisted theology of Pauline. She thinks of the monster in the lake (a Chippewa belief) as Satan (a Christian belief). According to Chippewa belief the monster can capture the innocent but is still appeasable. According to Christian cosmology, Satan cannot bother the innocent, but is not appeasable. The collision of codes forces her to a new conception in which the evil in the world is not appeasable and the innocent are vulnerable. Pauline's interpretation of experience is irreconcilable, Rainwater correctly asserts, in spite of her bizarre assimilations. This points out the impossibility and absurdity of synthesis and leads the reader away from synthesis into irresolution.

Another issue that becomes problematic in the anti-narrative is our task of deciphering characterization. The characterization of Karl and his symbolic significance is rendered impossible by several strands of associative fields. Karl is presented to us on overlapping grids of concordances: in Jude Miller's view he is the devil in the flesh. In the many descriptions of him that we have from various characters in the novel, Karl appears to be, from our collective cultural stock of imagery, a Satanic figure. But, as Catherine Rainwater points out, Wallace Pfef responds to the sight of Karl as "if a hive of golden insects [were] buzzing, floating, gathering the honey that filled him" (238), which she connects to the Song of Solomon, where the bride repeatedly speaks of Christ as "honey." So here Karl is presented as a Christ-like figure. Karl offers a

third perspective on himself, a yolking together of these two: he describes himself when he's at the seminary as a "pure black flame" (50), and even in the epithet, pure black, there is a connotative conflict. I might add paranthetically that Rainwater omits a connection made between Karl and Christ in the schoolyard incident. Rainwater also points out that Karl is likened to the archetypal Fool. Rainwater correctly notes that the additional chain of references to the Fool does nothing to get the reader out of this impasse, but rather insists upon an ambiguity, and as she says, "for the reader in search of resolution of conflict, this textual shift from one cultural code to another provides one more frustration of narrativity" (411).

Rainwater also correctly notes that beads works connotatively at many levels in Love Medicine. In the chapter where June Kashpaw is brought as a young child to Marie to be taken care of, June is holding a set of beads in her hand which a group of Cree Indians had given her. When June leaves home the beads remain with Marie who was once a devout Catholic, and Marie sometimes refers to the beads as "rosary" and says, "I don't pray, but sometimes I do touch the beads..." (73). And a third possibility is opened up by Marie when she connects the beads in her hands to the stones at the bottom of a stream. The stones are part of a recurrent chain of references in Love Medicine which Marie thinks of when she has the beads in her hands: "I touch them, and every time I do I think of small stones. At the bottom of the lake, rolled aimless by the waves. I think of them polished. To many people it would be a kindness. But I see no kindness in how the waves are grinding them smaller and smaller until they finally disappear" (73). This association takes the beads connotatively out of the spiritual realm into the phenomenal.

One chain of references that Rainwater does not address is that of "tracks" which exists connotatively at many levels in Tracks. Early in the novel in Nanapush's narration he is speaking of the fiercely independent Margaret who elected to not learn to read. While Nanapush is reading a newspaper and speaking to Margaret she angrily swipes the sheets aside.

> She swiped at the sheets with her hand, grazed the print, but never quite dared to flip it aside. This was not for any fear of me, however.

> She didn't want the tracks rubbing off on her skin. She never learned to read, and the mystery troubled her. (47)

Here we have a direct tie between tracks and meaning. In an odd usage, Nanapush uses the word to refer to printed letters on a page, to writing, coded meaning. Margaret has an instinctive aversion and distrust of these coded meanings. Nanapush, who can read because of his Jesuit education, is aware of Margaret's discomfort around the written word and takes advantage, putting the newspaper between them in order to put her off. Though Margaret did receive a Catholic education, she was not taught to read and write as Nanapush was because women were apparently not taught. So Margaret's alienation from the coded signs on the page is a double alienation, one she experiences both as an Indian and also as a woman. What gets enacted here between Nanapush and Margaret is symbolic of the intrusion of a writing culture into the lives of those who are members of a culture whose primary means of transmission of story, legend, ritual, etc. was oral. It also suggests the necessity of a distinction between the meta-fictional (literary, print) and the meta-narrational (folk, oral). Are we to take this as an indication then that the story, Tracks, is about the encroachment of white culture and the spiritual genocide of Indian culture? After all, Pauline essentially renounces her family, her language, her religion and finally her name by the end of the story. And the story also ends with Lulu, Fleur's daughter, forced off to government schools.

But the novel, as it tends toward this meaning, undermines it with other suggestions. From all appearances the novel's title seems to refer to tracks as we more commonly use the word, as a mark left by the passage of something. The reference comes in one of the more mystical and dramatic points in the narrative, when Fleur gives birth to Lulu. Nanapush's story here about the she-bear is the stuff of folklore, an instance in which the veracity of the story is not as significant as its meaning. In Nanapush's narrative, we encounter the heightened drama and collective nature of folklore. He addresses Lulu: "You were born on the day we shot the last bear, drunk, on the reservation" (T 58). And here we have the sort of punning that is characteristic of Erdrich's writing. Does the drunk refer to the "bear" or the "we" of the sentence? As we listen on, we learn. The story is about a bear that breaks into a jug of wine that Nanapush had hidden,

drank it, became drunk, and came stumbling drunk into Fleur's yard while she was in labor with Lulu. Nanapush confesses that he was alone when it happened, pointing out to us that the story is probably more myth than fact, since our other narrator cannot substantiate the story and never does. I should qualify, however, that myth in the sense of sacred narrative is fact within the context of a culture that believes. The bear, the story goes, walks into the house and when Fleur sees the bear she becomes so filled with fear and power that she raises herself on the mound of blankets and gives birth. The bear it seems is summoned there by Fleur as are all the animal spirits stirred during her labor. Nanapush speaks of all the manitous, the animal spirits, who "spoke through Fleur, loose, arguing...the turtle's quavering scratch, the Eagle's high shriek, the Loon's crazy bitterness...the bear's low rasp" (59). All the chaos and mystery of nature is breaking loose and the men, Nanapush and especially Eli, are rendered helpless and terrified. In fact, Eli finally breaks down: "Eli had broken down when the silence shattered, slashed his arm with his hunting knife, and run out of the clearing, straight north" (59). It is only Margaret, Pauline and Fleur who are allowed in the birth house, while Nanapush and Eli are kept out, forced to wait in the yard.

This piece of folklore undoubtedly tells of women's close tie to nature which remains an enigma to men. Nanapush tells us that when the bear was shot in the heart it didn't die but rather gathered up strength, stumbled out of the house, crashed into the brush of the woods, was not seen after. The salient point of the story is that this she-bear "left no trail either, so it could have been a spirit bear" (60). Here there is reference to no tracks, the no tracks signifying for us here the truths which sometimes escape the bounds of reality. Do the "tracks" of the title refer to the truths of a culture which transcend the rigid scripture we call history?

Possibly. But again, as we tend toward this meaning, other possibilities pre-empt our decision to assign meaning and present themselves. Tracks can not only be used as a noun as it is here, but also as a verb, that is to observe or monitor. This is first suggested in the inscription to the novel where Erdrich acknowledges her husband, Michael Dorris, who tracked moose in Alaska. It is odd practice to make reference to an inscription, but I think this usage of the word

warrants attention. It reflects a popular American image of Native Americans as great trackers. This novel, after all, is about tracking, observing and witnessing. Nanapush knows it is of mortal importance to bear witness to the lives of his people. He and Pauline track Fleur, more or less, throughout the narrative. Pauline knows all too well the burden and responsibility attendant upon the witness, especially a witness to an atrocity. It is Pauline who bears witness to the rape of Fleur, and the role of the witness is an inescapable destiny: "I relived the whole thing over and over...every night I was witness when the men slapped Fleur's mouth, beat her, entered and rode her. I felt all. My shrieks poured from her mouth and my blood from her wounds." (66). Pauline is very self-conscious of her role as an observor:

> I saw the same. I saw the people I had wrapped, the influenza and consumption dead whose hands I had folded. They traveled, lame and bent, with chests darkened from the blood they coughed out of their lungs, filing forward and gathering, taking a different road...I saw them dragging one another in slings and litters. I saw their unborn children hanging limp or strapped to their backs...(140)

Pauline tracks Fleur and in so doing, tracks the story of her people. As Nanapush points out in his own narrative, Fleur is the "funnel" of their history, who staggered bravely beneath the burden of being the lone survivor of the Pillager family.

Clearly these three examples are illustrative of the proliferation of meanings which characterize Erdrich's writing and illustrates too the slipperiness of interpretation. This proliferation of meanings explodes the myth of the traced way. This is the effusion of which Cixous writes, the effusion that spills over all boundaries, an effusion which relentlessly substitutes one meaning for another. Erdrich's is a fictional universe in which names and kinship roles, like meanings, are endlessly substitutable. Erdrich's conflicting codes and profusion of meanings put into action a critique of the Western modes of thinking, the either/or compulsion. For Cixous this profusion is a reflection of the female libidinal economy which is continuous, overabundant, and overflowing. The libidinal economy, according to Cixous, organizes and structures writing. Erdrich's writing

includes both a Christian and Shamanic framework in a cacophony that is like the landscape of her novels according to Karl Adare, a vast landscape where the wind comes up so loud, hitting nothing in its vast emptiness, but nevertheless so loud it made his ears ache. It was a "senseless landscape" (318). It is a kind of writing that is protean and defiant of the symbol by its very promiscuity with various symbols and narrative codes. Her repeated punning such as we find in "patient abuse" suggest the multi-layered perception that is characteristic of the female sensibility. This multi-faceted perception becomes a central issue in my reading of The Beet Queen.

Recurring throughout the work is the concern with the perspectival nature of reality, a sensibility which is certainly not masculine, but tends toward a feminine sensibility, and a stance which is undoubtedly subversive.

At the end of The Beet Queen Sita Kozka is driven through the parade in the front of Mary Adare's car, dead but propped up, looking off into the future, looking resolute to those observing from the bleachers, but looking stiff and quite dead to both Mary and Celestine. To Karl, she looked better than she ever had: "If anything, age had made her more attractive by refining her features...her head was tilted in a modest way, but her gaze was sharp and queenly" (321). Erdrich's refrain, "the story comes up different every time", refuses to be ignored. No story can be told adequately by one teller. And with every teller the story changes, and in turn, meaning becomes less fixed, more fluid, more malleable. Tied into this notion of the difficulties surrounding interpretation, perhaps even at its root, is the recognition that knowing and reality have very much to do with perspective. Hence, Erdrich's consistent use of multiple perspectives. By relying on multiple viewpoints, Erdrich implies something about the perspectival nature of reality. Our understanding of Fleur in Tracks would be horribly limited and distorted with only Pauline's point of view. But Pauline's point of view is necessary, for she provides us with the information on Fleur's life in Argus. As shaky as Pauline is as a story teller, the Argus chapter of Fleur's life is critical to her story.

Perspective has to do with one's relation to that which is viewed, and understanding and knowledge of a configuration is dependent upon this. Messer-Davidow describes this as

"perspectivity," which stands in contrast to objectivity (a masculinist myth), but also stands apart from subjectivism. Perspectivism privileges neither, but would bring together both and all and insist on multiple stances; it would institutionalize diversity. This perspectivity can be read in Morrison's Beloved as well. And Erdrich does this in The Beet Queen where the so-called objective stance is integrated into the narrative and put on equal footing with subjective, first-person narrations. Erdrich makes conspicuous reference to this matter of perspective in The Beet Queen. There are repeated allusions to different and differing views. One chapter is entitled "Aerial View of Argus." Towards the end of the story, when Dot gets dressed up for the parade, Celestine and Mary offer us two vastly different perspectives on what she looked like. "To [Mary], Dot looked ravishing...Mary thought her niece resembled an ancient pagan goddess...She had been reading about Atlantis in her Book of the Unfamiliar, and she could picture Dot touching the waves with an iron scepter" (325). But Celestine's view, perhaps more realistic (but not necessarily more true, for in Mary's perception there is a germ of truth—Dot has the superhuman strength of a goddess), Dot appears uncomfortable and desperate. Her shoulders seem hunched and she sits with her hands clenched into fists. Likewise, in Love Medicine, Gordie sees June in the shape of a deer, whether it is a hallucination, vision, or empirical observation. Sister Mary Martin, however, sees only a dead deer, according to her perceptual frame of reference. Erdrich's point is well taken in this incident. Our interpretation of events and hence the meaning we ascribe to them is so limited by our own frail perception that any claim on settled meaning is tenuous at best. This point is simply a variation on the theme of the anti-narrative: perception, like narrative codes, is culturally conditioned.

The shamanic dreamcatcher and the cross that hang next to each other over Pauline's bed in Tracks serve as a perfect metaphor describing the conflicting interpretations and meanings inherent in Erdrich's fictional universe. She repeatedly draws attention to the provinciality of the codes by which we attempt to interpret experience, and hence the unremittingly political nature of interpretation. In Erdrich's fiction, the human experience tends toward the chaotic, and understanding and meaning is murky. As Nanapush says, "there were so many tales, so many possi-

bilities, so many lies. The waters were so muddy I thought that I'd give them another stir" (61).

But the contradications in the narrative codes and the narrative perspectives are not incidental; they are central to understanding Erdrich. "A successful work," wrote Theodor W. Adorno, "is not one which resolves contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure" (32).

So at this point we may very well ask of these metafictional gestures, to what end? I think it is necessary to reiterate that Louise Erdrich is both Native American and female and thus doubly alienated from history, and thus we must see these gestures as nothing less than revolutionary in their intent. Such writing reminds the reader that traditional narrative structure, whether historical or fictional, is part of an arbitrary psycho-social contingency, which if left unquestioned, inhibits change and growth. Metafictional gestures call attention to and thus challenge entrenched structures and pave the way for change and growth.

NOTES

[1] I owe a tremendous amount to Gayle Green whose work in Changing The Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 14-22, provided me with useful insights for my reading of Erdrich. Green examines the work of contemporary British, Canadian and American women writers for various metafictional practices. Her examination centers on works that are far more self-consciously metafictional and feminist than Erdrich's.

[2] Elizabeth Abel, "(E)merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women," in Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 1981, 6,3. Abel uses object-relations theory to explain the dynamics of Nel and Sula's friendship in Sula. Her insights were helpful in my endeavor to tease out some of the complexities of Celestine's and Mary's friendship.

[3] Bell Hooks, "Writing the Subject: Reading The Color Purple," in Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology (New York: Meridian, 1990) 455. Hooks argues that The Color Purple is ostensibly, in form and content, a sentimental novel, but this is completely undermined with the development of Celie's relationship with Shug, but Walker fails to carry this far enough by cutting short that relationship; she goes on to add that Walker fails to undermine patriarchal values of domination and control by leaving oppressive structures intact at the end of the novel. Erdrich, assuming a more radical stance than Walker, never allows Karl to supplant the place of Mary in Celestine's life.

[4] Catherine Rainwater, "Reading Between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich," in American Literature 62, 3, 1990. Rainwater's article was helpful to me throughout the disseration. Her work on Erdrich was groundbreaking in that she was one of the first members of the academic community to recognize the importance of Erdrich's contribution.

CHAPTER II

WOMEN, SILENCE AND MADNESS

Integral to the inquiry into the specifics of a feminine discourse is the recognition of the silent spaces in between words, located at the outer limits of intra-feminine discourse, the zone of silent communion. The starting place for French feminist critics is Jacques Lacan who defined the human subject as not only a speaking subject with an unconscious, but also a masculine or feminine subject in relation to the Oedipus complex. Our pre-verbal selves exist in the pre-Oedipal stage, a stage defined by relation to the maternal. Our entrance into the Symbolic order, into language, is at the Oedipal moment, defined by our relation to the phallus, the signifier which mediates the play of absence and presence which constitutes language. Hence the Symbolic is paternal, masculine. If, as the Lacanian model suggests, the language each of us acquires upon entering the symbolic order is masculine, then it is understandable why women find language alien. Because women lack the organ whose signifier, the phallus, organizes and rules the linguistic system, their entrance into language is organized by lack or negativity. Feminist critics have pointed out that women's writing is reclusive in the margins of discourse, for when females enter the paternal Symbolic (on Lacan's model), their subject position is either as pseudo-males or marginalized females. But Kristeva is quick to point out that this process is not female specific, because men are capable of assuming a female subject position in language. She points to the works of Joyce and Mallarme who both explore the repressed in language, the irrational and evocative properties of language that we identify as rhythm and intonation. The repressed can also exist in the silent gaps, that zone of silent communication which holds within it that which cannot be articulated in language. Feminist critics have turned to the works of Emily Dickinson with its abruptness, dashes, pauses and gaps as a mine for uncovering the repressed in women's writing.

In this chapter I will examine the "silent gaps" as they exist in Erdrich's work. In this examination of The Beet Queen, I will explore how Adelaide's and Sita's stories are throwbacks to the tradition of stories by women writers in which protagonists are driven mad by the expectations of white patriarchal society. Sita's and Adelaide's stories are a repetition of the old story in which the trajectory of the protagonist's life is to find the right man, fall in love, get married and have children. A woman's quest is supposed to end safely in marriage and motherhood, and when the protagonists finds out differently, that safety and closure really turn out to be stifling entrapment, escape by any means (whether flight, madness, or suicide) becomes necessary. Both Sita's and Adelaide's madness are manifested as an hysterical silence.

Silence has always been an issue for women who have had their silence imposed upon them by patriarchal practices which have stripped them of a speaking position in the dominant discourse. But there is also a different kind of silence, a volitional one, described by women writers such as Mary Daly and Tillie Olsen, which is "the new sounds of silence," exclusive to women because it is an "intersubjective silence, the vibrations of which are too high for the patriarchal hearing mechanism...ultrasonic" (Daly 153). We can attribute women's speechlessness to the fact that they were subjected to silence for so long, but also that what they did manage to say was not heard. In short, the issue of women's silence can be attributed to the problematic of women's relationship to language. Language is alienating to women because it expresses 'universality' in masculine grammatical forms, and this supposed 'universality' has the effect of rendering women invisible. Gisela Breitling in "Speech, Silence and the Discourse of Art," writes of how the German language excludes women (especially in the case of an artist) from universality. In German, a man who paints would describe himself as a painter and would have no difficulties with the noun, maler. However, if a woman were to describe herself as a painter, she needs to use the form of the noun malerin. Thus one is forced to say she paints *as a woman.* Thus she finds that her work is corralled by language into this special limited context, confining her to a segregated space from which she is denied any universality. As the feminine is put into this segregated space, it is marginalized and not able to realize itself in what is universal and cannot represent what transcends the gender-specific (164-165).

Whether or not we accept the French school's revision and critique of Lacanian psycholinguistics, it is not difficult to accept the fact that language is a system of signification that is male-biased. Because language is the most pervasive of signifying practices, and because it is encoded with androcentric biases, it is complicit in the oppression of women. Modern linguistics, and Saussure's reorientation of linguistics to the study of the systemization of a given state of language, greatly informs our understanding of language and the formation of meaning. Language is a system of signs that expresses ideas, and the interrelationship of signs thus determines meaning. Language is a self-referential system, and, whatever our sex, we are trapped within its limits, and the limits of our language tend to limit our perception and our understanding of the world. And if language is a prison in this general sense, it is especially so for women. As language is a pre-established system of referrents and signifiers, as it is firmly entrenched and fully endowed with meaning, we must comply with its rules and accept pre-established categories. We are thus spoken by language. In turn, we do not have a preverbal sense of ourselves which we can express through language. Since we come to language, we come to a subjectivity that is already produced within this system. The problem for women and feminist critics is how masculine and feminine subject-positions are produced linguistically, and how this system is used to confer meaning on women. "How can female writers," asks Linda Gillman, "work with a language produced by a social order in whose history they have played no part?" (12)

It is clear that Lacanian theory is based to a large extent on Freudian theories of the Oedipus complex. We certainly know that though much of Freudian theory implies a universality, much of his work on psychosexual development is actually historically bound. And the fact that feminist critics give so much energy to the works of Derrida, Lacan, Foucault and Barthes is mind-boggling considering how long male thinkers and writers have dominated critical discourse, a trend that women have been trying to overturn. Kristeva replicates the language of these thinkers, a language that is so riddled with abstraction that it is nearly inaccessible, and I only hope young feminist critics of my generation aren't so enamoured of her work (it is indeed revolutionary) that they seek to emulate her in style. But we must remember that Kristeva is more of a pyschoanalyst than a literary critic, and she is only

inadvertantly responsible for recent trends in feminist literary criticism. Whether or not we agree that Lacanian psycholinguistics is a worthwhile point of departure, we must come to some agreement, from whatever paradigm, that women do have a problematic relationship to language. Since Kristeva has done so much work in this area, I found that she was an integral part of this chapter, whether I agree with all of what she asserts or not. There are, of course, feminist literary critics who have grown tired of so much attention being paid to such highly theoretical and esoteric subjects. Barbara Christian takes white feminist critics to task for abandoning their own literature. She worries that critics don't even read stories or poems anymore, being mired in the obligatory reading of other critics and philosophers. She sees the French school tending toward monolithism. She acknowledges their correctness in being irritated by the theories of Lacan for whom language is phallic. But, she asks, what if there were peoples in the world whose language was invented primarily in relation to women? Some Native American languages (and all romance language, she neglects to add) use female pronouns when speaking about non-gender-specific activity.

The issue of women and silence exists in Erdrich's novels at two levels: First, I will briefly examine how it functions formally at the level of narrative strategy in Love Medicine and Tracks. Secondly, and at much greater length, I will examine how it is addressed thematically in The Beet Queen.

At the narrative level in LM and Tracks, women characters occupy a *silent center* in the text. Women are the absent centers in a world of other people: they are seen only as others relate to them. Love Medicine begins with June Kashpaw, and she is the thread which links together the disparate characters and chapters of the novel. But she is denied her voice, her story, her own point of view. The same is true of Fleur Pillager in Tracks. Fleur is the center here, the subject who never speaks but who is spoken about from the beginning of the novel, a narrative strategy which replicates the problems encountered by women historically: to speak - or to try to speak - is to experience difficulties in finding an appropriate speaking-position in an androcentric mode of discourse which designates men as the enunciators and relegates women to the realm of the enunciated. The contradiction surrounding the silent center/subject in Erdrich's novels replays the difficulties surrounding women, language and subjectivity. As I have already pointed out, at a universal level, language is problematic

because it is already there before we encounter it, and because we cannot hope to make ourselves understood unless we comply with its rules. We are in this sense 'spoken' by language, however much we delude ourselves into believing that we control it when we learn to speak. Consequently, we do not have a prelinguistic sense of self, a subjectivity which we learn to express in language; rather, our subjectivity is preconstituted. The fact that neither June nor Fleur have a voice in the narrative reflects the historical fact that women have been and are denied a speaking position in culture. Fleur and June do not tell their stories because they cannot tell their stories. Even in what we might call the 'June' chapter of Love Medicine, the narration flows from a disembodied voice, not June's.

At this point it might be necessary to clarify the connection between language and romance. The romantic novel is an ideal arena for illuminating the problematic between women, subjectivity and language. It is an arena in which women are central figures, but figures whose subjectivity is undermined, figures who do nothing, will nothing, who make nothing happen. If in the romantic novel a woman's life and her subjective experience is mortally limited, then it is only fitting that such characters lose their ability to speak. For without volition and desire, surely there is nothing to say. All that remains is mindless chatter, merely talk. To speak would be an absurdity.

In many ways, June and Fleur mirror each other. Both are the silent centers around which the stories of each novel revolve, the enunciated who never have the opportunity to enunciate. Both assume a mythological position in each novel. June and Fleur are the orphans, the disinherited who roam the wilderness. Marie Kashpaw takes June in when she is deposited on her doorstep, and comes to love her as one of her own children. Marie senses that June is alienated from language: "She hardly spoke two words to anyone and never fought back when Aurelia pinched her arm or Gordie sneaked a bun off her plate. That is why, as things went on, I found myself talking for her...it was as though I took over and became the voice that wouldn't come from her lips but could be seen, very plain, in the wide upslanted black eyes" (66). And Nanapush has the responsibility of telling Fleur's story for her, the story that Lulu, her daughter needs to know but her mother is unable to tell. Fleur and June make their presence felt without ever speaking a word: Fleur and June communicate silently.

The problem of women and silence is also explored thematically in The Beet Queen with Adelaide and Sita, who, having bought into the sexual ideology and finding themselves in marriages where they are supposed to be taken care of, eventually lose their minds and also their ability to speak. The institution of marriage, as it exists in our patriarchal culture, tends toward the disempowerment of women. This disempowerment is supported by a legal system that, in some egregious instances, does not even allow women the integrity of their bodies. Traditionally, in the institution of marriage, women become chattel, forfeit their names, and thus are stripped of their identity. An unstable identity presents one with an uncertain speaking position. To speak implies a self, a subjectivity which desires, and speech is an articulation of that desire. Cixous in "Castration or Decapitation?" makes the distinction between speaking and talking: "they [women] talk, talk endlessly, chatter, overflow with sound, mouth-sound: but they don't actually *speak*, they have nothing to say. They always inhabit the place of silence..." (49)

In "The Birdorama" chapter of The Beet Queen Adelaide, Mary and Karl's very feminine, male-dependent mother with whom Sita coincidentally identifies, loses her speech. Adelaide runs off at the beginning of the novel with Omar, the pilot, in a mockery of the romantic plot in which the man saves the woman from her prison (here, three children, homelessness, poverty), sweeps her off her feet, and in a typically romantic fashion, goes off into the horizon to a far away place where she finds closure, male protection and happiness. The promise of Romance (the name Omar with its suggestion of a dark, exotic flavor works perfectly here, and Omar, we should note, is the anagram of amor) throughout the novel and is undercut repeatedly. In chapter 1 I discussed how Erdrich's work called attention to that convention and subverted it in many ways. Romances, as we remember, usually end when the woman is rescued and taken away, and typically end with a sense of peace, all passion spent (it is no coincidence that when we get to the later chapter and find Adelaide and Omar leading a seemingly "peaceful" life, that Adelaide looks at Omar with "spent" eyes). Romantic love is a myth which entices young women to sacrifice their own careers in the expectation that the most important thing in their lives is to marry the right man and live with him happily ever after. To Shulamith Firestone, romantic love is consequently "the pivot of women's oppression," because it induces

women to submit willingly to their own subjection, and survives even the most corrosive of attacks" (121). We find Adelaide, for example, later in the haven of male protection: the birdorama. The birds who cannot fly, trapped within the wire dome, are a metaphor here, for Adelaide finds herself trapped within the confines of Romantic safety and closure. As Carolyn Heilbrun has noted, safety and closure have always been held as the ideals of female destiny. Romances and romantic myths contained in fairy tales encourage women to internalize only aspirations deemed appropriate to their "real" sexual functions within a patriarchy; to Marcia Lieberman they are "training manuals for girls" which serve to acculturate women to traditional roles" (395). They are not however the places of adventure or experience, or life. Adelaide goes nowhere, only looks out upon the "rain-wet leaves from the tiny window of her bedroom," while Omar, goes out fishing with his trawling buddies. In captivity, Adelaide (whose name, Adel = addle, and 'aide', suggests confused dependence) loses her mind and retreats into woman's place, silence:

> For days, Adelaide's silence and the brooding look she turned on the rain-wet leaves outside the tiny window of their bedroom warned Omar that she was building up a fit of anger. *Her rage had nothing to do with him* (230)

The hero of the Romance that Adelaide must have imagined for herself turns out to be an inept, incompetent, and weak man. In the face of her rage he is frightened and useless:

> In blue darkness, awakening to find her gone from their bed, he *sneaked* downstairs to *spy* on her mood...Omar watched her for a moment then *retreated* upstairs, dressed himself, and climbed down the flimsy back stairway...He felt her pain like it was inside of him, *but could do nothing.* (230-231)

The irony of "her rage had nothing to do with him" is unmistakable. It had everything to do with him. The third person is limited omniscient and it moves in and out of Omar's perspective but interestingly enough never into Adelaide's. Erdrich explores at the narrative level the pathology of Adelaide's situation. She is silent, without perspective, and the only noise she makes is the "wordless scream," a regular ritual apparently. The parallel between the mindless frenzy of the birds eating and the

mindless frenzy of Adelaide sweeping ornaments off shelves is perhaps too clear, and the parallels exist at several levels. The birds' movements are repetitive, short and choppy, unnaturally limited by the cage which encloses them. Adelaide's movements, in this unnatural environment, have also lost their natural grace: "Her touch was quick and hard. She snapped when she spoke..." and "poked at a little jade plant" (BQ 228). This is an unnatural silence. It is the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot, the thwarting of desire. The birdorama is the cruel irony of promise, the promise of security and safety. Its silveriness and glitteriness ("the great silver gazebo that glittered through the palms and attracted visitors from the local resorts") is merely a large birdcage from which she looks out upon life from the "tiny" window of their bedroom (230). Adelaide's silence is one with which women have been familiar for centuries, a hysterical silence, the type of silence that Helene Cixous speaks of in "Castration or Decapitation?":

> Silence: Silence is the mark of hysteria. The great hysterics have lost speech, they are aphonic, and at times have lost more than speech: they are pushed to the point of choking, nothing gets through. They are decapitated, their tongues are cut off and what talks isn't heard because it's the body that talks, and man doesn't hear the body. (49)

Deprived of Adelaide's point of view, we are privy to Omar's thoughts and are struck by the irony of his thoughts against the context. Responding to Adelaide's violent outbursts, Omar can only think that

> there was no reason to stop her...Glassware was cheap and the closest neighbor was a quarter mile off. It was the waiting that *oppressed* Omar. (231)

Perhaps the most glaring irony is the choice of the word oppressed to describe his condition. The irony of Omar's detachment from the situation, his inability to understand Adelaide, is a replaying of the historical relationship between men and women. Men cannot understand women's desires because women are unable to articulate them. Men cannot expect an answer from a woman, according to Lacan, because she cannot speak her pleasure. No wonder Omar is baffled. He can,

however, without impediment, imagine his own desires when Adelaide comes "back to herself" (231).

Another striking parallel between the birds and Adelaide is the problem with memory. Every morning when the birds wake they go through a routine where they first start "to complain, to throw themselves back and forth across the inside of the wire dome" (230). After reconciling themselves to the limits of their quarters the birds calm down to sing and feed. And this routine is repeated every morning because the birds forget from one morning to the next. Surely this is what Adelaide's problem is — forgetting. At the beginning of the novel she is being supported by a man who is married to another woman. Everything in Adelaide's household where she lives with her three children is precariously dependent upon this relationship, and when Mr. Ober dies, she loses everything. Mary Adare recalls her mother's difficult dilemma:

> On the day of the funeral, we took the noon train to the Cities with only what we could carry in suitcases. My mother thought that there, with her figure and good looks, she could find work in a fashionable store...but she didn't know that she was pregnant. She didn't know how much things really cost, or the hard facts of Depression. (7)

Mary's perception of events is devoid of any romanticism. When she sees The Great Omar her vision is 20/20, reflecting a realist's commitment to all the details, including the uglier ones:

> I looked at The Great Omar for the first time. The impression he gave was dashing, like his posters. The orange scarf was knotted at his neck and certainly he had some sort of moustache. I believe he wore a grease-stained white sweater. He was slender and dark, much smaller in relation to his plane than the poster showed, and older. (12)

And instead of remembering that the plot of her own life did not follow the prescribed plots for romance, Adelaide falls into it again with Omar (whose name is curiously similar to Ober). Adelaide's problem, like that of so many women, is that she is intelligent, but her memory is severely deficient, like that of the birds in the cage: "Their brains were tiny, the size of watch mechanisms, accurate but stupid. They couldn't hold one idea in their heads overnight" (231). This is reminiscent of Betty Freiden's lament in The Feminine Mystique in which she described the housewife's malaise as a loss

of memory, a loss of the ability to experience "the dimensions of both past and future." Freiden compares women, housewives in particular, to men who have "portions of their brains shot away": "What they lost was... the ability...to order the chaos of concrete detail with an idea, to move according to a purpose... tied to the immediate situation in which they found themselves...they had lost their human freedom." Deprived of a "purpose stretching into the future [housewives] cannot grow [and so] lose the sense of who they are" (312-313). And as Lee Sanders Comer caustically puts it, forgetting is so necessary to a housewife's existence; it "is their only contribution to the world" (139).

Another theme embedded in Adelaide's story is the idea of flight, a recurring trope throughout the novel. The novel begins with Adelaide abandoning her children, running off toward the plane. But we see Karl in flight throughout the novel, and at the end again, Adelaide's granddaughter replays the opening scene of the novel, when she tries to escape in a plane. Flight as a metaphor holds special significance for women who have historically tried to emerge from the restricted spaces assigned to them for their existence. Helene Cixous has noted the significance and the complexity flight as a trope has held for women:

> To fly is the gesture of woman, to fly in language, make it fly. All of us have learned the innumerable techniques of the art of taking off since for centuries we could accede to having only by stealthily taking. We lived by stealth, stealing off, finding narrow, hidden crossing passages. Stealing is a taking and a taking off, played out between two interdictions, both enjoyed as the avoidance of the police of common sense (meaning). It is not pure chance then that woman has something of the bird and the thief, as the thief has something of woman and bird: they pass, flee, enjoy the scrambling of orderly space, of disorientation, changing the place of furniture, things, values, breaking in, out, voiding structures...(885)

It is certainly no coincidence that the two characters who fall into this hysterical silence are the two male dependent housewives, Adelaide and Sita Kozka. Sita is pretty and slender and relies to a great extent on her sexuality to get what she wants. And her cousin Mary recognizes at an early age that the traditionally assigned female virtues of beauty and frailty, of which Sita has plenty and which she herself lacks, would be the difference that saves Mary and drives Sita mad:

> And so, as the years went on, I became more essential [at the butcher shop] than any ring or necklace, while Sita flowered into the same frail kind of beauty that could be broken off a tree by any passing boy and discarded, cast away when the fragrance died. (21)

And a chapter later, Sita confirms Mary's perception of her:

> I really thought that Mary ran away from her mother because she could not appreciate Adelaide's style. It's not everyone who understands how to use their good looks to the best advantage. (28)

Sita loses her voice for the first time at her wedding reception, and the male friends of the groom take her against her will into the back of a car to leave her stranded out in the country. Their intent is to repay her for her thinking that she was too good for Jimmy, her husband, their friend. The humiliation that they subject her to is only a prelude to the humiliation and degradation that she will have to endure as a housewife to Jimmy. Outnumbered and overpowered, with no female companions to help her, she is successfully subdued. Sita tries to scream but can only muster a whisper, "jackass" (99). She finds herself in the parking lot of a bar on the reservation, knocks too lightly (ladylike we presume) to be heard. Then nature responds as it does so many times in Erdrich's fictional universe; the wind picks up dramatically and blows her into the bar:

> What the ten people and the bartender experienced coming at them through the door was a sudden explosion of white net, a rolling ball of it tossed among them by freezing winds. Two bare spike-legged legs scissored within the ball, slashing lethal arcs, tearing one old man's jacket before he reared away in fright. And the ball *was* frightening, for while the wind tumbled it about and the patrons of the bar dodged to avoid danger, it kept up a muffled and inhuman croaking. (100)

The fact that she ends up on reservation land is not incidental. Sita is forced to confront exactly what she resents and fears the most, that which she tries to distance herself from by way of a respectable middle-class lifestyle. The values of the reservation and the place of women on the reservation is much different from that which the town offers. The sexual proprieties of middle-class life are unknown on the reservation. The women in the bar are described as "loud," and it seems that

the two women who are in the bar are sharing Russell Kashpaw "for the evening." And yet, though earlier in the novel Sita had felt threatened by Mary, it is now Sita who is threatening and dangerous to the women in the bar. And unlike the two women in the bar who have no problem finding their voice to assess the perplexing situation, Sita goes from an inhuman croaking to strained silence. Her response to the humiliation is intense rage, a rage that she is unable to give voice to: "She rose to her feet, disheveled but normal in all respects except that her face was loose and raging, distorted, working horribly in silence" (100).

It is not until Sita's second marriage that she falls deeply into hysterical silence. As it had with Adelaide, memory seems to betray Sita. After her first marriage fails, she finds her second husband almost immediately, and in Celestine's accurate perception, the man "[seemed] a way out of the restaurant business, a chance for Sita to make a new start in life" (124) an observation which is confirmed a chapter later when Sita acknowledges: "...it was as if Louis and I had been together all our lives. Maybe it was because he had to take care of me"(BQ 144). The backdrop here is not a bird-cage, but, interestingly, a green-house where her husband, Louis, keeps all of his entomological specimens. And Sita is like a caged specimen, a laboratory rat. Louis is a prolific notetaker when Sita begins to lose her mind. He is always there with his pad, recording what she is saying like a scientist recording the pained response of a gerbil to testing. She completely loses her capacity for speech, and Louis commits her to a mental hospital which he tries to convince her, unaware of the irony, "is just like home" (205). In the psychiatrist's curious assessment, Sita had to be there because

> ...she'd pretended to lose her voice, and ever since
> then Louis and her neighbors had been reading her lips.
> She grew to like the way they bent close, puzzling out
> her words, studying her face for clues. She grew to
> like it so much, in fact, that she lost the ability to speak
> out loud. (205)

The psychiatrist then admonishes Louis for having been too kind in encouraging Sita into her silence, for condoning her behavior by reading her lips. The loss of her speech is a natural progression for a woman in Sita's position, for women who attempt to play by the rules of patriarchal sexual politics find that they are ultimately betrayed by those very rules. The loss of her specch is one step in a series

of steps by which Sita's volition is stripped away. Later, we find that she takes the inevitable turn for so many women — valium. The institutions of motherhood and marriage, as we commonly know them, are traps for women who expect safety, security and happiness, the ideals held before them to lure them this way. Celestine reads all those romances but she holds them up against experience to find they are poor blueprints for young women and hold not even a vague resemblance to her own life: "In the love magazines, when passion holds sway, men don't fall down and roll on the floor and lay there like dead. But Karl does that" (134). She knows that she doesn't want to get married, and when Karl proposes marriage to her, she recognizes the absurdity of trying to graft her life onto a romantic plot:

> Something in this all has made me realize that Karl
> has read as many books as I, and that his fantasies have
> always stopped before the woman came home worn out
> from cutting beef into steaks with an electric saw. (136)

Mary too recognizes that marriage is not for her, but there is one occasion where the idea of romance momentarily seizes her and she confronts the possibility of marriage. But it is only momentary. She falls for Russell Kashpaw, Celestine's half brother, falling for the unsettling dark grandeur of his face, scars and all. But at the first hint of ill treatment, Mary awakens from her stupor and faces the realities of her life, and her realistic and ambiguous feelings about marriage:

> I did not choose solitude. Who would? It came on me like
> a kind of vocation, demanding an effort that married women
> can't picture. Sometimes, even now, I look on the married
> girls the way a wild dog might look through the window at tame
> ones, envying the regularity of their lives but also despising
> the low pleasure they got from the master's touch. (69)

Mary knows of the hierarchy implied in the patriarchal institution of marriage, the master-slave nature that characterizes it. When Sita, pushed to the point of speechlessness in the mental ward, meets Mrs. Waldvogel, she is at first pleased to have a nice, normal, ordinary woman as a roommate. Indeed, so normal is this grandmother, this woman who not only apparently married, but has even raised children and now bears the rewards of being a grandmother — the laurels awaiting every woman at the end of the road beyond marriage and motherhood. She greets Sita in a maternal tone,

calls her "girl," something that Sita finds calming. The older woman is the picture of domestic bliss: "She wore an old-fashioned housedress and a ruffled apron" (208). But underneath the illusion of domestic bliss lies a rage so severe that its only expression is violence. The older woman does the traditional grandmotherly thing — she begins to show Sita pictures of her children and grandchildren. And then, Sita begins to feel that she likes this woman and she begins to think that she'll like the mental hospital. But then Mrs. Waldvogel helps Sita to find her voice in the most unexpected way. While the two women are looking at the picture of her grandchildren, Mrs. Waldvogel confides, "It's terrible to eat human flesh," in her sweet voice. She goes on, "I devoured the last one" (208). What did Sita see in Mrs. Waldvogel, this cannibalistic grandmother? Surely a woman upon whom desperation must have descended, unremittingly. Also unremitting, and Sita could verify this from her own experiences, are all the humiliations, the subordination, the self-effacement, self-abnegation that can attend marriage and motherhood. And certainly Sita saw herself in that woman, a woman who did all the right things, who loved and gave and who surely lost her voice at some point, at least metaphorically.

After Sita's first confrontation with humiliation, kidnapped by her husband's friends from her own wedding, she should have run. But her memory is faulty, as was Adelaide's, and she goes on, doomed to repetition. So much of women's suffering within the confines of marriage is unheard, undramatized suffering. So much anger and rage is suppressed so as not to disturb the equinimity and tranquility and harmony of the middle-class home, its Norman Rockwell-like serenity. Learning to bear the tedium and frustrations quietly and gracefully is the art of the homemaker, as Sita knows all too well. Sita, in her room in the mental ward, thinks back to what spring really means for her: "She saw herself touching [the flower's] tiny bells, waxen white, fluted, and breathing the ravishing fragrance they gave off because Louis had absently walked through her border again, dragging his shovel, crushing them with his big, careless feet" (211).

Sita is looking to be saved and marriage is the only means. Like her Aunt Adelaide, Sita is without skill and the income she makes as a model is "good money" she acknowledges, but she wonders vaguely that "something more should have happened" (84). She has her dreams about moving to

Hollywood, an opportunity she feels that she has missed, and now that she is at the age of thirty (she says with pained resignation) those dreams are remote: "The only thing that would save me, now, was to find the ideal husband" (84).

Sita does not find "Mr.Right" as she describes him, but allows herself to be courted by the man who "saved" her from the unfortunate affair with the married doctor, Jimmy. She is frustrated because Jimmy does not court her the way men properly do in romance. "That was another thing," she laments, "he had no courtesy for opening a girl's door. In restaurants he barged through and let me fend for myself behind him" (86).

There are times in the courtship when Sita feels that the ensuing relationship is not good for her but dismisses these instincts and allows herself to be "won" against her "better judgment." Sita knows, however, that she is a commodity, and the source of her value as a commodity is her body. This is painfully evident when as a young teenager Sita tries to hang on to her friendship with Celestine (for whom she and Mary are competing) by taking Celestine away from Mary to a private spot in the cemetary in order to bare her breasts to Celestine:

> I thought of what to show her. My breast were tender. They always hurt. But they were something that Mary didn't have. One by one, I undid the buttons of my blouse. I took it off. My shoulders felt pale and fragile...I took off my undervest and cupped my breasts in my hands...She hesitated just a moment and then turned on her heel. She left me there, breasts out, never even looking back. (35)

Sita gives in to the idea of marriage with Jimmy; even though he isn't Mr. Right he still provides her the security of marriage. Three years later, the year is 1953, Celestine narrates that "the bottom is falling out of Sita's situation" (112). Her dream of middle-class coziness is subverted by Jimmy's desire to run a greasy-spoon, which fails to bring Sita the lifestyle and prestige she had hoped to gain from marriage. Her methods of survival haven't changed, however:

> Sita, however, remains toothpick thin and sour. To stay beautiful, she has to work harder than ever on herself. She spends hours at the hairdressers, money on skin treatments, and she ends up looking stuffed and preserved. (112)

Mary Adare, by contrast, "seems to have grown heavier in the past few years, not stouter, just more unshakable in deed and word" (113). Mary's key to survival has been self-sufficiency, business savvy, and strong-headedness. The more years that Sita spends in marriage the weaker she becomes. She does finally get a divorce from Jimmy and tries to start her own restaurant. But she is not well prepared and needs to be rescued again. This time it is the state health inspector who investigates her failing restaurant. In desperation, she has found her new man. Celestine observes the courtship: "She smiles and looks almost girlish again. Her hair is tousled" (124). Both Mary and Celestine stand in stark contrast to Sita's dependent lifestyle. While observing Sita with the new man, Celestine has an understanding: "This man seems a way out of the restaurant business, a chance for Sita to make a new start in life" (124). Initially, Celestine is happy for Sita, but then she begins to ruminate on things, on the contrast between herself and Sita:

> I think of Sita's face again....It makes me wonder about myself. Are these things that Sita feels, these pleasures I have read about in books, the sort of feelings I might experience? It has never happened yet, although I've known men. Perhaps I think I am too like them, too strong or imposing when I square my shoulders, too eager to take control. (125)

It is after seeing Sita being coquettish that Celestine has her first sexual encounter with a man. She finds that she is unable to be coquettish in the same way and finds that sex is not what she thought it would be like. When Karl, the man with whom she has sex, proposes marriage to her, she responds unequivocally: "I'm calling the state asylum. You're beserk" (136). She goes on to tell him that it is not just him, it is the institution. Celestine has quite a different take on marriage then Sita. Even in the face of pregnancy, when most women would jump at marriage, Celestine resists. Celestine sticks to her guns knowing that marriage would be too much of a sacrifice, too much of a compromise of her freedom. She tells Karl, "It's not just you, I don't want to get married....I'm the kind of person that likes having dreams" (136).

The next time we see Sita is after her second marriage, this time to the health inspector. And immediately she falls into the old pattern. Her nerves are getting steadily worse, but she feels relieved that she and Louis have a large backyard where she "occupied" herself "growing ornamental shrubs,

perennials and climbing vines" (144). That she needs to occupy herself suggests that her life with Louis is no more fulfilling than her first marriage to Jimmy. And her occupation with perennials reminds us of the mindless repitition of her own life. Her pace of reading mysteries picks up speed: "In the past weeks I'd consumed boxes of mysteries to soothe my nerves" (145). And her submerged rage finds its way to the surface at odd moments. When she sees her cousin Karl lying in her front yard she grips her trowel "like a weapon" and imagines murdering him with it and burying him beneath the dahlias. Sita's rage, submerged but apparently growing through the years of marriage, seems to have peaked. Sita looks out upon her yard and imagines that it looks like a cemetary. She acknowledges a deep sense of betrayal, but it is her betrayal of Karl she thinks that is upsetting her so profoundly. But then the blame for betrayal becomes confused. She thinks that the only way Karl can be saved is if he, not she, says the "healing" words: "Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa" (153). And then, a few moments later, she describes a fantasy in which she sees a tree that "bore the leaves of [her] betrayal" (153). And here we are not sure whether she is referring to her decision to call the police on her cousin Karl, or whether she feels betrayed herself. We would assume she means the former rather than the latter, but we cannot be sure because she then turns to Louis and addresses him in a contemptuous tone, implying that it is he who has betrayed her.

After Sita is released from the mental hospital she spends the rest of her days, unhappily at home, hooked on valium, until she dies. Sita ends her life by committing suicide, taking a handful of pills: "I know quite suddenly that I've come to this moment over time. I have walked over empty spaces to get here. I have arrived. And then it's easy. I swallow them all" (286). Surely her life has been a series of profound mistakes. Her dependency on men and her beauty has left her unprepared for old age, and there is an appalling fatality about this insight into her life. In her last moments, Sita reflects on her life and her connection to Adelaide: "They thought she was cracked by misery, but how I understood her!" (287) To Sita, Adelaide's flight was romantic, a graceful exit from the unpleasant realities of life, a clean escape. Little does Sita know of the reality of Adelaide's life with Omar in the birdcage, that it was little different than her own in Louis's laboratory. But romanticism is Sita's vital lie, the sustaining illusion, and she holds on to it until the bitter end: "So she flew off. That's what I

should have done instead of transplanting phlox...white phlox up against a white fence. It never worked. I should have painted the fence blue" (287). Sita had been in love with the color white, for its purity. Sita's assiduous devotion to purity, to things romantic, like a princess in a fairy tale, fails her in the end. Sita's life story is the frustrating, repetitious life of women whose life stories are merely love stories.

Betty Freidan provided for historical documentary in The Feminine Mystique what writers like Shulman and Ballantyne and several others provided for fiction. So many of these stories were stories of confinement — women trapped in domesticity — confined in apartments, houses, bell jars, trapped in unbearable situations from which there is no exit, trapped like Adelaide in her birdcage. Sita's madness, so profound, stemming from a betrayal so unfathomable to herself that even by the end of the novel, on her last day, she looks back on her life without an ounce of enlightenment or insight, is a madness beyond language, one that takes the form of hysterical silence.

Sita's story does not end in a breakthrough or revelation, but disappointingly in a beet festival, where she is paraded down the street, still an object for the male gaze, as Karl notes:

> Although her face was shadowed and distorted by the dusty windows of the truck, she didn't look as though the years had told her tale. If anything, age had made her more attractive by refining her features to the bare minimum. (321)

Sita never finds her way out of the game of sexual politics. But Erdrich offers us an alternative in Celestine's and Mary's lives, both of whom were subjected to the same ideology of the times, but somehow managed to transcend it. Mary and Celestine's story provides us with a challenge to the "old, old story," of love and romance, the story that has undermined women time out of mind. Their story replaces the old one with a story of female self-sufficiency, a story in which mastery over their environment is more important than mastery over their hair or wrinkles, and where mutually supportive and affirming friendship takes precedence over romantic love.

CHAPTER III
'HIS MOUTH WAS SWEETLY CURVED, HIS SKIN FINE AND GIRLISH': ANDROGYNY AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

In the last chapter I examined the troubling issue of identity as it is formulated in various spheres, one of which is gender. I provided a gloss on Kristeva's theory on the construction of gendered identity, but I find that psycholinguistic theory on gender contruction alone is not enough to support an argument on how gender identity is developed. I think it is also necessary to examine how gender is constructed through social institutions and cultural imagery.

It should be understood that sex differences are not gender differences: sex differences and the physiology of procreation are biologically determined. Sexual dimorphism can be found in all mammals. Humans, however, interpret and shape their social and physical environments through symbols; we are culture-generating animals, and culture is a system of symbols that reflects ourselves. Sex differences, too, have come to be understood symbolically, i.e., through gender. Of importance here is to see how culture has come to represent gender through literature, how gender becomes institutionalized, and how such institutions can be challenged.

I examine 1) how psychoanalytic discourse has helped institutionalize various cultural notions about gender, and 2) how Western culture has conceived of gender, and 3) how feminist critics deal with this issue. Gender is suitably defined as "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes" (Scott 30-34). This perceived difference in the sexes is constituted by several factors, the first of which is the culturally available symbols. Secondly, there are the culture's interpretations of the meaning of those symbols, interpretations that limit metaphoric possibilities for the symbols. And underlying these interpretations are concepts, concepts we recognize as the fixed binary opposition, the categories of male and female.

The psychoanalytic field has done much to give scientific validation to many ideas about gender rooted in our culture already. But recent feminist psychoanalysts have called into question and even overturned some notions surrounding gender and gender roles. Many feminist psychologists and

sociologists, such as Nancy Chodorow in The Reproduction of Mothering, insist that we are all psychologically sexed and gendered. Chodorow examines how sexual ideologies as a social construct circulate through cultural systems. Essentially these ideologies are reproduced in families. She examines how the family structure fosters the differential development of the feminine and masculine psyche. Women, as mothers, Chodorow argues, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother, capacities that grow out of the mother-daughter relationship itself. Conversely, mothers produce sons whose nurturant capacities and needs have been systematically curtailed and repressed. So Chodorow challenges what earlier theorists such as Jung had proposed as natural, masculine and feminine principles, as being sociologically and psychologically produced. She gives scientific validity to Simone DeBeavoir's assertion that one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one. Despite the work of social scientists like Chodorow, our culture's notions about gender remain rigid and bipolar.

Western thinking tends to be bi-polar and the obvious problem with dividing life up this way is that one pole of the pair assumes value over the other; one pole takes precedence hierarchically, and hierarchies confer power, and its pervasiveness is mortally stifling to women. As Helene Cixous notes: "Man/Woman automatically means great/small...superior/inferior... Nature/History... transformation/ inertia.

> In fact, every theory of culture, every theory of society, the whole conglomeration of symbolic systems—everything, that is, that's spoken, everthing that's organized as discourse, art, religion, the family, language, everything that seizes us, everything that acts on us—it is all ordered around hierarchical oppositions that come back to the man/woman opposition, an opposition that can only be sustained by means of a difference posed by cultural discourse as 'natural'...(44)

What Cixous is saying is that our society is organized around a hierarchical opposition, an opposition that is deeply encoded into our language and the weight of connotation is crippling for women. Language thus becomes women's enemy because it entraps them. The equation of men with culture and women with nature has been historically a deadly pairing for women. Claude Levi-Strauss is largely responsible for conceptualizing the most famous binary opposition in structuralist thought—the Nature/Culture distinction. Levi-Strauss grafted the model offered by structural linguistics onto his structural anthropology in order to explain the essence of kinship structures. Marriage relationships and kinship systems, he theorized, could be understood as a kind of language. This analogical

argument replicates the argument that uses systemic linguistics to illuminate the workings of language. Levi-Strauss argued that it is "the women of the group, who are circulated between clans...in place of the words of the group, which are circulated between individuals, implying that both women and words serve as currency within culture.[1] This conceptualization encodes both nature and woman as passive and for man's use, which has served to justify male exploitation and destruction. Nature is the way things are, culture is what we make them out to be, the refinement of nature. Nature is undifferentiated continuity and culture is the institution of difference upon which communication rests. Homologies like those of Levi-Strauss, the equation of woman to nature and man to culture, has been a pervasive problem for women, and many feminists have rejected this equation. Sherry B. Ortner insists on the dismantling of female to nature and male to culture equation, for binary oppositions are replicated at every level in a given system, and the weight of this is deadly for women.[2] The distinction, culture and nature, is a highly dubious one, a fact pointed out by other feminist writers. If woman were truly an essence, if an eternal feminine truly existed — a unified, transhistorical, transcultural subject— would she even be able to articulate her experience, her essence if the language she speaks is so androcentric?

The traditionally Western mode of bi-polar thinking poses a challenge to feminist critics and writers. One of the tasks of feminist criticism, according to Adrienne Rich, is to see a piece of literature "as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see—and therefore live—afresh" (18). And it is certainly an easier task to understand how we have been taught to imagine ourselves than to understand how language works to undermine us. Erdrich takes our settled images of what is female and what is male and turns them inside out. This kind of re-visioning is liberating and empowering for women. "A literary work should provide role-models," according to Cheri Register, instill a positive sense of feminine identity by portraying women who are "self-actualizing, whose identities are not dependent on men" (20). Whether or not the women characters in Erdrich's novels are models of emulation is debatable; but she shuffles definitions of feminine and the masculine in a movement which is at once refreshing and liberating. Indeed, we are unaccustomed to seeing in either literary and cinematic imagery women like Mary Adare, Lulu Lamartine, or Fleur Pillager.

One of the projects of feminist criticism has been to dismantle literary representations of gender to see how these depictions are a function of various ideologies about sex that need to be reconsidered. Gender traits, we should first recognize, are only theoretical; they are social constructs

and do not exist except as social constructs. Feminist critics have in common with Marxist critics the belief that any meaning-conferring apparatus such as literature either implicitly or explicitly makes statements about class, sex or gender, and such embedded ideologies help to perpetuate institutions. The problem then becomes a self-perpetuating one; we institutionalize practices which support our original suppositions; and, in turn, we structure our lives accordingly, assign roles, bestow values, dispense priveleges and so on. By recognizing first that these categories are merely social constructs, we can free ourselves from the hegemony of our sexual ideology. Our Western train of thought insists first of all on two categories, as if this were the only way of ordering the world, and the insistence on either/or rather than both/and. Then traits are assigned (strength and weakness) that define the relationships (domination and submission) between categories. Subsequently the male locus becomes centralized and the female locus marginalized, the male the norm, the female the deviant, the male the self, the woman the other. Such valuations have recently been re-defined by French feminists who have reversed the values without reversing the traits.

All reading is political and a feminist reading involves the contesting of natural attitudes, the challenging of agreed upon definitions—definitions which feminists have long recognized to be an integral aspect of the oppression of women in society. More than one feminist reading is possible in the case of Erdrich. In the first chapter I focused on subversive narrative conventions; here, I will borrow from a different method of feminist critique, one which focuses on literary representations of gender. In its nascent stages, feminist literary criticism was concerned primarily with representations of gender and gender relations in the writing of men. This project was eventually displaced by what became a more pressing need, the need to unearth women writers buried in obscurity. With the publication of Revolution in Poetic Language in the late 1970's, feminist literary debate became centered on the dynamic between feminism and psycholinguistics. Kristeva, mentioned at the end of the last chapter, called into question the very notion of gender. The iconoclastic temper of deconstructionism could be used to deconstruct gender. This ran headlong into the school of French feminist thought which propounded women's essentialism, the gynocentric impulse to insist that there is something unique about women's writing. Kristeva thinks this inquiry is theoretically naive: given that unified subjectivity has been exposed as a myth, it would be ridiculous to argue the possibility of a unified sexual identity. Unfortunately debate seems to have moved further away from the text, and the project of examining gender representation has become overshadowed, but its importance has not diminished. And we need not only examine such representations from male writers but female writers as well to see what representations of sexuality, of maleness and femaleness, they render in

their descriptions of reality.

As I have just mentioned, there are two strains in the feminist debate that are at odds with one another: the project of articulating women's experience and the project of deconstructing gender. The former is represented by writers like Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous and their theories of l'ecriture feminine and the project of articulating women's essentialism seems to have gotten more attention than the latter project. The deconstruction of gender entails stepping back from the prescribed notions of male and female, dropping such constructions so as to loosen the hold of gender as a descriptive and prescriptive category. This theoretical project renders gender more fragile, more tenuous, less salient as both an explanatory and an evaluative category. The deconstructive project supports and embraces difference; it is antifoundationalist. It defends that which resists categorization, which refuses to be corralled into the category of male or female. This is a radical project because it calls for the loosening of strict definitions surrounding male and female, the basic structures that enable sexism to exist. Such deconstruction challenges our sexual ideology with its rigid distinctions and inflexible categories. When I speak of "sexual ideology," I am referring to socially accepted behavior for men and women, and this ideology serves to justify the status quo and to persuade the powerless that their powerlessness is inevitable. Our sexual ideology prescribes both sexual behavior in the form of strict heterosexuality and social behavior in the form of action—men should be masculine, women should be feminine.

I examine in this chapter how Erdrich challenges our sexual ideology by rendering characters that are androgynous (they are not, however, the androgynes that we find in Le Guin's Left Hand of Darkness). By producing male and female characters who defy our gender role expectations, Erdrich's writing aims to disrupt these fixed categories, to expose the illusion of the naturalness of binary gender representations in order to reveal their androcentric bias. Erdrich realizes that it is not only necesary to dismantle these androcentric constructions of gender stereotypes, but that something has to be re-constructed in their place- a reconstituted literary reality. I go beyond examining Erdrich's rendering of women; her women are part of a larger reconstituted literary reality, one that upsets our notions about women, men and sexual mores.

Erdrich deconstructs the categories of male and female by the creation of characters who are androgynous. Even structurally Erdrich's novels are gender balanced: the narrating consciousness is split equally between the male and female, i.e., there is an equal number of male and female narrators. I think that the interest in creating androgynous characters can be traced to her own identity as both woman and a Native American. In many Native American cultures which were not patriarchal

there was not a strict division of gender roles: women served often as warriors, shamans, and husbands to other women. That work which was specifically women's was not devalued as it is in our culture. Western patriarchal culture, with its insistence on hierarchy, does not allow for such egalitarianism. Secondly, the concept of androgyny is welcomed by women in general who find that in a dichotomous culture, women are less valued. Androgyny subverts the rigidity of patriarchal taxonomy and we find Erdrich's writing subversive because it reveals to us the very arbitrary nature of these categories.

Few writers have dealt with the problem of sexual ideology in the way that Erdrich does, i.e., in the creation of androgynous characters who disrupt readers' expectations relating to "appropriate" roles and qualities and in a sensitive portrayal of homosexual love. Many writers have challenged the sexual ideology of their times, but it was often the case that the protagonist, trapped within conventional Western sexual ideology ends tragically, like Hardy's Tess.

As I had mentioned previously, it was in an earlier phase of feminist literary criticism that scholars focused on representations in male-authored literature, specifically images of women that were stereotyped and deprecating. But my work here is part of a tradition of analyzing how women are represented in female-authored works, as Alicia Ostriker does in "The thieves of language: women poets and revisionist mythmaking." In this work, Ostriker examines how contemporary women's poetry revises patriarchal myths and values. She looks at a body of poetry by American women written over the last twenty years to examine these writers' "invasion of the sanctuaries of existing language" where the meanings for "male" and "female" are stored (68-90). She finds that these poets maintain the traditional images for the female body—flower, earth, water— but impose a reversal in signification: water can be equated with safety instead of death; earth means creative imagination rather than passive generativeness. And, as I have identified in Erdrich, a flower comes to mean something other than frailty. Furthermore, Ostriker finds in these women poets the desire to recover the female creatix, a figure that had long been displaced by the abstract father god who created the universe ab nihilo. Even in Jung, where there is a recovery of the female creatrix, she is split in half into the Sky Goddess (asexual) and the Earth Mother (sexual but brainless).

Erdrich dispenses with this sort of division in her creation of characters like Lulu Lamartine and Celestine James, both of whom are more than Earth Mothers; they are a harmonious mixture of flesh and spirit. Lulu Lamartine is introduced to us in Love Medicine, in the chapter entitled "The Good Tears." She narrates herself as being a unfamiliar character, unfamiliar within the novel's own universe. But as readers we recognize that she is unfamiliar to the pages of literature as well, unlike

anything in novels or mythology (at least Western mythology). "No one ever understood my wild and secret ways," she begins the chapter. "What aggravates them is that I've never shed one solitary tear. That's unnatural. As we all know, a woman is supposed to cry." She's philosophical and political:

> All through my life I never did believe in human measurement. Numbers, time, inches, feet. All are just ploys for cutting nature down to size. I know the grand scheme of the world is beyond our brains to fathom, so I don't try, just let it in. I don't believe in numbering God's creatures. I never let the United States census in my door, even though they say it's good for Indians. Well, quote me. I say that every time they counted us they knew the precise number to get rid of. (221)

Another means of disrupting our expectations is the way Lulu speaks her sexual desire. We are unaccustomed to women's writing or speaking of their pleasure frankly and openly the way men theoretically do. Many of Erdrich's female characters are comfortable with their sexuality, indeed, take for granted their sexual needs. And in speaking her sexual desire, Lulu reveals both the delicate and the violent, the passive and the aggressive in female sexuality.

> The more I think about it, I just never got Nector where I wanted him. At my mercy, I suppose, so that I could have my will. That's how I got most of them... Even bald and half blind as I am at present, I have my youth and my pleasure. (218)

Lulu, like so many of Erdrich's women characters, embraces and expresses her sexual desire. This is something we do not expect of women as women are taught that they shouldn't desire sexually, that indeed, nice girls do not enjoy sex. Women are taught to shut off their libidinous drives, taught to hold out until they are in love, properly courted, and so on. It is men with their uncontrollable libidos that women have to watch out for and placate when necessary. Aside from the regressive psychosexual propaganda women have to contend with, when we turn to film and literature we only finds again that women are merely the objects of male sexual desire, and we can rarely find the expression of female sexual pleasure and desire. Part of the problem is that women still lack the language to express these desires. Women desire differently than men, and they would have to express their desire differently than men do; women, especially in Lulu's and Pauline's time, had no developed sexual discourse. We are still more accustomed to male sexual discourse, but women, like Erdrich, are finally beginning to establish their own discourse.

We find, for example, that Lulu's baldness conjures up another image, one that is typically a

counterpoint to the creatrix—that of the destroyer. In fact, Erdrich creates several bald women characters (Fleur Pillager in Tracks and Margaret Kashpaw in Tracks). This demonic imagery, like the three "disquieting muses" with their three "stitched bald heads" of Sylvia Plath's "The Disquieting Muses," suggests a darker, demonic, and destructive side to women's nature long suppressed by the need to equate femininity with virtue. Pauline too becomes associated with the image of the destroyer and the darker evil side of human nature. Pauline narrates herself using the image of a crow, an image that is connotatively male, for it is large and black and rough-sounding, and because it is a scavenger, it is typically associated with death. As we recall from Tracks, Pauline becomes the sorcerer, the evil witch who uses magic on the young girl Sophie, making her prematurely and preternaturally sexual to ensnare Eli Kashpaw. We also recall that Pauline strangles Napoleon Morrissey to death on the shores of the lake. In the scene where she confronts him, she describes herself as "ready and strong as a young man"(201). She engages Napoleon in an erotic wrestling match, narrated with the kind of impressionism that had come to characterize Pauline's storytelling style, which ends when Pauline drops her rosary beads like a noose around his neck and strangles him. Pauline is supernaturally strong, killing a man who we know is larger with her bare hands. At the end of this scene Pauline, naked, rolls in slough mud to coat her body, covering herself so thoroughly, breasts and all, that one would have trouble determining if she were a man or a woman. She describes herself as a "lily of the field," borrowing from the traditional stock of female imagery, but she recognizes the unsuitability of such imagery to describe herself by qualifying it: "...though no such flower as I had yet appeared on reservation ground" (203). Pauline, in Tracks, becomes known as the midwife of death, a role she greatly relishes. She starves her body down to fleshlessness, so that in its martyr-like tautness it resembles a man's more than a woman's body. She becomes associated with death to the townspeople. She dons black clothing and, like the grim reaper, goes from household to household, ushering the dying to their end.

> I came before the priests, appeared in my black clothes, and now when people saw me walking down the road, they wondered who was being taken, man, woman or child. I was a midwife that they hailed down with both interest and dread. I was their own fate. (75)

Pauline's narration betrays a note of pleasure at the awe and fear that she elicits from the locals. Her role gives her a sense of empowerment, perhaps because she upsets the expectation that women are frightened in the face of death. In fact, Pauline begins to genuinely enjoy the feel of the dead: "I handled the dead until the cold feel of their skin was a comfort, until I no longer bothered to bathe

once I left the cabin but touched others with the same hands, passed death on" (69). It is upsetting too because in our contemporary culture it is usually men who handle the dead, but in Native culture it is usually widows who assume that role. In fact, in our culture men have appropriated the significant activities of birth and death, activities that were traditionally handled by women. In our culture there is little support and indeed strong opposition to the wave of midwifery that has resurged. And Pauline's hardness of demeanor has its corrollary in her body's morphology. She does not have the softness and fleshiness of a woman's body. There is a sexlessness about her body that Napoleon discovers one day when they attempt to have sex. After he undresses her, he flatly says to her, "you're as thin as a crane." They do not consummate the sexual act because Napoleon turns away from her: "He stopped for some reason, nothing we said or did, but like a dog sensing the presence of a tasteless poison in its food" (73).

Erdrich's conflation of the creatrix and the destroyer in several of her women characters is one way in which she challenges our culture's concepts of gender. Several of her women characters are brutal and violent. Fleur Pillager is fierce, and as Nanapush describes her, "dangerous." She has supernatural powers conjured for revenge against the men who had raped her and against the government who had driven her off her land. Fleur has a special connection with Misshepeshu, the lake monster everyone fears. Furthermore, Fleur is for the most part narrated by Pauline through a chain of associations that is typically male, like the wolf, an animal that is distinctly masculine in our warehouse of cultural imagery. But then in one passage, Pauline uses both masculine and feminine imagery in describing Fleur: "She fanned through her cards, hunched and drawn as an old witch woman, lean as a half-dead wolf..." (162).

Fleur is a hunter too. When Eli Kashpaw first meets Fleur, she is gutting a freshly killed doe: "When he saw the woman gutting with long quick movements, arms bloody and bare, he stepped into the clearing" (42). Fleur's adeptness with a knife ("the knife loose and casual in her hand") and her strength and her intense physical bearing mystify Eli. This is an important reversal of a traditional gender distinction that strongly correlates to the subordination of women to men. One theory of women's subordination is attributable to ideas surrounding human's early adaptation to the environment. The "hunting hypothesis" assumes hunting was necessary for our ancestor's survival; that males did most of the hunting; and this hunting adaptation set the pattern for sex roles that persist today.[3] The "man the hunter" hypothesis argues that females were less mobile due to the burdens of childbearing and nursing, and therefore, were less able to develop the aggressiveness, the attention to detail and so on which are cultivated in the hunting ritual. But there has been a good deal

of recent evidence which contradicts "man the hunter" theories. The most significant might be that hunting may not have been as important in early adaptation as thought; indeed there is no absolute evidence that hunting was done at all, let alone limited to males. Furthermore, in many cultures, women are known as hunters. As anthropologist Christine Ward Gailey points out in her article "Evolutionary Perspectives on Gender Hierarchy," Inuit women, for instance, know how to fish and hunt and do both routinely. And the Agta women in the Phillipines often hunt, using knives or bows and arrows (Hess and Ferree 34). Furthermore, the distinction between hunting and gathering has recently been found to be a dubious one. The male-biased hunting hypothesis is responsible for making the division between hunting and gathering, and thus inflating the importance of hunting and belittling the importance of gathering. Recent anthropological studies have found that many aboriginal populations do not distinguish between harvesting and hunting. Indeed, hunting, gathering and harvesting all serve the same purpose—feeding the population, and to give one activity more importance over the other is a distortion. In making Fleur a hunter, Erdrich is challenging one of the most pervasive of myths, one among many others that have been used to relegate women to an inferior social status.

Part of Fleur's power stems from her sorcery, but much of her ability to intimidate can be attributed to her impressive physical presence. Nanapush recalls the story of Fleur's seeking revenge on the two men who assaulted Nanapush and Margaret. His narration of Fleur is not resonant of anything we find in Western mythology; this is an unfamiliar female figure, one of raw and dangerous force:

> Fleur was seen in town...though it was cold she left
> her head bare so everyone could see the frigid sun glare
> off her skull. The light reflected in the eyes of Lazarre
> and Clarence, who were standing at the door of the pool
> hall. They dropped their cue sticks in the snow, and ran
> west to the Morrissey farm, which was so near the settlement.
> Fleur walked the four streets, once in each direction, then
> followed. (119)

Leaving aside the phallic implications of the two men dropping their cue sticks upon seeing Fleur's bald head, Fleur's appearence in town is an event in itself, like some mythological creature emerging from the forest. The mere sight of her, the blinding rays reflecting off her shaved head, is enough to make the men flee in terror. This passage has the feel of mythology, the heightened drama, the power of the supernatural. This sense of the presence of a mythology always remains impressionistic, and it is not based on any concrete distinctions of myth as a genre. Nevertheless, it seems Erdrich has created a new mythology with female figures that are more appealing than those handed down to us

in traditional Western mythology. These female characters are more complete, more whole, more balanced than the whores or madonnas to which we are accustomed in popular literature and mythology. Mythology, as Ostriker points out in her article, has been inhospitable terrain for women writers. The male figures are more positive than the female: they are either conquering gods and heroes, deities that are superior to and dominate Mother Nature. But female mythological creatures are disappointing. The are either sexually wicked—Venus, Circe, Pandora, Helen, Medea, Eve—or virtuous and helpless—Iphigenia, Alcestis, Mary, Cinderella. And hence the dichotomization of women between angels and whores. But Erdrich, in Fleur Pillager, creates an embodiment of a variety of attributes, both feminine and masculine. She is dangerous to those who threaten her, but deferential to Nanapush. She is destructive (she slowly kills Lazarre with her magic), but she is also nurturing. It is Fleur in The Beet Queen who finds Karl Adare alone and sick with pneumonia. Again she appears like a figure from mythology, but here she is more like an angel of mercy than an evil creature from the woods. She is as dazzlingly bright as she was before, but here it has different effect, different connotations: "Her head was bound in a white scarf that blazed against her dark skin. Twin silver mirrors dangled from her earlobes, flashed, dizzied me" (48). Her hands have a magical, healing touch. She sees that Karl's ankles are badly broken from his having jumped off the boxcar. She kneads and molds his ankles back into shape and feeds him and makes him well again. There is an incredible tenderness that counterbalances the fierceness that we see in Tracks. And even here in this description, the tenderness is accompanied by a brute, raw strength. Fleur ties Karl onto the top of her cart full of goods and drags him and the cart with "her head through a horse collar" (51). And as we find in Pauline's narration of Fleur, there is a melding together of contradictory traits: "Fleur's customers were wary and approached her with a hint of fear, as if she were a witch or maybe a saint cast off to wander" (52). There is something saintlike in Fleur's handling of Karl. When she takes Karl back to the convent near the settlement, she carries him in her arms. When the nun opens the door of the convent to greet the two of them, the nun is so overwhelmed by Karl's bad smell that she covers her mouth with her hand. But Fleur does not flinch at his smell. Fleur hands Karl to the nuns like an offering, and before they can decide whether or not they can take him in, Fleur departs. In Erdrich's creation of Fleur, feminine tenderness is linked together with masculine brawn, masculine fierceness with feminine tenderness, feminine nurturance with masculine destructiveness. Even Karl's description of her physical bearing contains contradiction. Her dark and broad face is "fine" and "delicate" around the edges. Her "heavy" mouth is "curved" at the corners. Erdrich's creation of more androgynous characters like Fleur is part of the task of many women poets and novelists to challenge

and correct gender stereotypes embodied in traditional myth and literature. Women's experience has given literature a new semantic context so that words and images such as "flower" take on new significance and meaning; the old bottles are being filled with new wine.

With the creation of Fleur, a mannish woman, Erdrich defies our sexual ideology in another way: by not conflating gender inversion with homosexuality. It has become an article of faith in our culture to equate female masculinity with lesbianism, perhaps because lesbianism is seen as a neurosis, a condition in which psychosexual development has taken a pathological turn. Both gender ambiguity and lesbianism threaten our deeply engrained Victorian sexual codes. Gender ambiguity in our culture, manifested in either men or women, is threatening to the social order. The beliefs that our culture harbors about sexuality are integrally related to our notions about gender. People are quite willing to infer sexual orientation on the bases of physical appearance, making a specious connection between homosexuality and the possession of the opposite-sex attributes, falsely assuming that gender-related characteristics could predict sexuality. These beliefs provide support for the binary nature of our gender belief system. Fleur, we know from Tracks, is (intensely) sexually involved with Eli Kashpaw.

One way for writers to break out of this rigid dichotomous system is not to equate sex identification with gender identification. Erdrich's non-conformist renderings go against a tradition of cinematic and literary imagery that conflate sexuality and gender identity. Esther Newton argues in "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman" that Hall's depiction of Stephen Gordon as a "mannish" lesbian fails to repudiate the logic of our sexual ideology. The implicit statement, following the logic, is that a woman who rejects passive, heterosexual femininity for active homosexuality must be masculine.[3]

Erdrich, in her characterization of Celestine James and Mary Adare, rejects such sexual ideology and does not conflate sexuality with gender identity. Both Mary and Celestine have masculine gender traits: Mary is thick, square, practical, strong ("with no one to protect and look out for, I was weak") and aggressive. Celestine shares many of Mary's traits, and, because of their similarities, Mary is drawn to Celestine: "She was strong. Her arms were thick from wrestling..." (37). But their bond is emotional, never physical. Both Mary's and Celestine's orientation is heterosexual; although Mary is attracted to Russell she never becomes sexually active. But Celestine does become sexually involved with Karl Adare and eventually has a child with him.

Gender balancing and the exchange of gender roles were historically significant factors in the lives of various groups of Native Americans. Among the Mohave Indians, for example, a young female who

felt strongly that she wanted to live as a man would go through a special ritual, the members of the nation would accept her/him as a man, and she would do men's work. Becoming a man also meant taking on a man's sexual practices—in other words, marrying women. Woman Chief, a woman warrior from the Crow nation whose accomplishments in war elevated her to the rank of third warrior among the chiefs, had four wives. Among the Mohave, lesbians, known as hwame, would undertake all masculine activities, including marrying women, riding, and hunting. Since their stories depicted homosexuals as wealthy, they usually put lesbians in charge of the household and its property. Among the Canadian Kaska, parents with more daughters than sons would encourage a daughter to "become a man"; such women married other women, and were often considered outstanding hunters. Many Indian nations accepted a range of sexual practices—heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual—and allowed youths to experiment sexually before marriage.[5]

Not all of Erdrich's characters are gender balanced. Some of the women characters are strongly feminine identified, and we can find two such characters in The Beet Queen. These two characters, Adelaide and Sita, serve as a contrast in behavior and lifestyles to Celestine and Mary. I will begin first by taking a closer look at the name of Fleur Pillager, who is a minor character in this novel, and see how it is an ironic allusion to our literary history.

Fleur Pillager's name itself suggests an androgynous quality, the balancing of the life-giving, fertile quality of her first name Fleur, *flower*, and "pillager" with its suggestion of destructive aggression. Fleur is an ironic allusion to those other flowers in the American literary landscape, Lily Bart, Daisy Miller and Daisy Buchanan, tragically weak, and whose stereotyped characters function to reinforce the sexist view that happiness for women is based on feminine subordination, a notion which supports male domination. In Erdrich's fictional universe, it is those women who balance the masculine and the feminine who survive. It could be argued that Hurston had a similar project in Their Eyes Were Watching God in associating Janie with the pear blossom (feminine psychological principles) and far horizons (male psychological principles). Janie never fits into the prescribed and limiting roles for women, roles each of her lovers tries to impose on her. Janie returns triumphantly and defiantly at the end of the novel, androgynous in her overalls and her long swinging braid of hair. In Erdrich's fictional universe, gender ambiguity is positively associated with autonomy. All the women who can be identified as andgroynous live relatively free of male domination; conversely, all the women who are strongly female identified are more male dependent and less able to adapt healthily. Those women who are subsumed by feminine culture, trapped within the traditionally limiting roles assigned to their gender, e.g., Sita Kozka in the The Beet Queen, do not survive. Sita, like her aunt Adelaide,

relies on her femininity entirely to ensnare men, who, she assumes, will then take care of her. Regarding their frailty and beauty as strengths, both Adelaide and Sita end tragically, both betrayed by the system of gender politics in which beauty, vulnerability and frailty are such vital currency for women. Sita's idea of self-preservation is taping a band-aid across her forehead to prevent aging lines: "The only thing that would save me, now, was to find the ideal husband" (84). And even though Sita has moments when she recognizes the dangers of entering into this system ("He called me by his favorite desserts. Sweetpie. Muffin. Sugardonut. No wonder he was getting fat. Being called those names made me feel puffed up too, unpleasantly sweet, and too soft, like risen dough"), her middle-class ambitions override her instincts that this is bad for her, and she capitulates to gender politics (86). Sita ends up in a mental hospital, stricken with the inability to speak. Sita Kozka is Mary Adare's cousin and it is Sita's family who adopts Mary when Mary is abandoned by her mother. Sita serves as a foil to Mary. Sita and Mary meet when they are both pre-pubescent, at an age before women are fully initiated into feminine culture and gender conditioning. It is apparent from early on, however, that Mary's sense of survival, gained from having been cast off by her mother at an early age, differs vastly from Sita's and that of Karl Adare, Mary's brother, both of whom had a good deal more pampering. Mary is physically and mentally strong, resourceful and hardworking and eventually works her way into ownership of the butchershop. Mary knows that survival requires an incorporation of male psychological principles. In reflecting upon the loss of her mother and the deep intense emotionalism that followed, Mary recalls a decision she made on the heels of the painful longing: "We sank down on her bed and cried, wrapped in her quilt, clutching each other. When that was done, however, I acquired a brain of ice" (15). Sita, possessed by feminine principles, relies on looks, charm, and the power of seduction to provide her with some sense of security. In Erdrich's fictional universe, the lack of integrated gender traits is negatively associated with dependence.

In the same way as Sita, Adelaide is strongly female identified and male dependent. Our first image of her is the one Mary offers us in her narration in which Adelaide gets dressed up for Mr. Ober. Adelaide is wearing a blue silk dress and a necklace of "sparkling stones," and her braid is twisted into a crown on top of her head. Adelaide's lover, always referred to as Mr. Ober (aside from the deferential nature of "Mr.," ober sounds a little suspiciously like over), comes to visit often, and Mary notices that his voice was deep pitched, but Mary likes it "counterpoint to or covering [her] mother's" (6). Adelaide too recognizes that her beauty is vital currency, and thinks that she'll be able to support her two children on her good looks and her figure. When she realizes that she's pregnant, she is suddenly unmarketable. After a few months their money runs out, and Adelaide comes to the

knowledge that being a single mother of three children and having no marketable skills is not an enviable position. Just before Adelaide runs off with Omar and runs out on Karl and Mary forever, she reveals in a gesture her commitment to the sexual ideology that divides men and women into two rigid categories. At the fairgrounds Adelaide takes the little leftover money she has and buys a gift for Mary and a gift for Karl. She buys a pearl-handled jackknife and gives it to Karl. She then buys a silver and gold necklace and hands it to Mary. Mary instinctually resents her mother's channelling of her into the feminine and Karl into the masculine. From what we know of Mary, we assume that she would rather have had the jackknife and would have gotten more use out of it than Karl. Mary refuses the necklace and Adelaide reproaches her by calling her a Damp Blanket. In this brief interaction between Adelaide, Mary, and Karl we see how gender expectations are reproduced from one generation to the next, that girls and boys are rewarded or punished for behaviors that are deemed appropriate and that help sustain this system of differentiation. The last glimpse we have of Adelaide is the one in which she is living with the man she has run off with, Omar, in what seems to be a birdcage. The image we have of her is a harrowing one: she looks mad, dishevelled, standing in the midst of broken glass and on the heels of a temper tantrum. The house that looks like a birdcage is a suitable metaphor for the entrapment that Adelaide finally comes to recognize is the price to pay in this system of gender differentiation where women are expected to be weak and dependent.

In Erdrich's fictional universe it is not only women who have integrated opposite-sex attributes into their psychic make-up, but also several men have.If we look at the Lipsha Morrissey chapter in Love Medicine, we find a sensibility that is not necessarily masculine. Lipsha, grandson to Marie Kashpaw, is what one might call a medicine man or a Shaman, chosen usually because of their honesty, devotion and wisdom, three qualities that Lipsha clearly has. Although the primary duty of the traditional Shaman was to heal the sick, other abilities were often claimed, such as causing or averting rain, and the Shaman would perform various tricks to prove such skills. Lipsha (his name even has a feminine ending) is strongly intuitive, confessional, chatty, deeply feeling, and nurturing:

> For one whole day I felt this odd feeling that cramped my hands. When you have the touch, that's where longing gets you...I felt her side of it with my hands and my tangled guts, and I felt his side of it within the stretch of my mentality. (193)

Lipsha's chapter is full of feminine instinct. The content of the chapter is focused relationships and personal love — characteristically female topics. Many feminist critics who are interested in the idea of women's language have taken a very empirical approach, looking for actual evidence of the

existence of a woman's language. This kind of inquiry is closer to sociolinguistics as opposed to the psycholinguistics of Kristeva and it has been helpful in my reading of Lipsha's chapter. Robin Lakoff's study entitled "Language and Woman's Place" attempted to prove its thesis that the "marginality and powerlessness of women is reflected in .... the ways women are expected to speak" (45). She attempts to specify certain lexical, syntactical and intonational features as characteristic of woman's language. In the matter of lexical choice for example, she claims that only women ever use words like "sweet" or "divine" to convey non-ironical approbation. Lakoff also points to deferential speech habits which she considers distinctly feminine. Women, in her analysis, tend to blunt the edges of their speech with modifiers and qualifiers, softening their declarative statements with qualifiers such as "I think," "perhaps," or making declarative statements but then curtailing their assertiveness with interrogative intonations such as "isn't it?" Other sociolinguists have noted that it is prolixity that characterizes writing by women. Leslie B. Tanner, in her preface to Voices From Women's Liberation, writes that she has done little editing and cutting of material because she wants women's voices "to be heard as they are without conforming to man-made rules of professionalism" (ix). Given this sociolinguistic theory of language, we can look at Lipsha's narrative and find several passages of what Lakoff would term woman's language. All of Lipsha's feminine words of approbation ("favorite") or his constant qualifier ("I guess") makes his chapter feminine as well as his fluency, the profusion of words. As Pamela Fishman points out, conversations between men and women would not carry on with such ease if women were not doing what she called the "interactional shitwork" (99, 100). Virginia Woolf also noted that women's writing was "often chattering and garrulous - mere talk spilt over paper and left to dry in pools and blots" (40). Arnold Bennett, in referring to a feminine style of writing, spoke of its lack of restraint and wordiness and its "utter absence of feeling for form" (6). And Helene Cixous, turning Bennett's idea of a vice into a virtue, will declare that a feminine textual body can be recognized by the fact that it is always without end, has no finish. If prolixity authenticates femininity, then we have in the Lipsha chapter a feminine speaking voice emerging from a male character. And again the feminine can be recognized in the content:

> And then I waited...the thing I know how to do best in this world,
> the thing I been training for all my life, is to wait. Sitting there
> and sitting there was no hardship on me. (201)

Erdrich's defiance of the sexual ideological dicta is perhaps most explicit in The Beet Queen. Mary Adare and her brother Karl Adare arrive in the town which will become the setting of the novel. The narrator's descriptions of Karl and Mary foreground the un-characteristic behavior that follows

from girl and boy. Karl's mouth is described as being "sweetly curved," his skin "fine" and "pale," all epithets traditionally feminine, and even later in the narrative, Wallace Pfef sees that "[Karl's] body was pale and lean and his cries were soft" (239). Mary, not curvacious at all, is "square and practical." As they walk along the street, they pass a tree full of blossoms. Their reaction to the tree is noteworthy: "Mary trudged solidly forward, hardly glancing at it, but Karl stopped. The tree drew him with its delicate perfume. His cheeks went pink..." (2). When Mary takes over the narrative in the following chapter, we are presented with a sensibility that is not necessarily feminine:

> It was not that with Karl gone I had no one to protect me, but just the opposite. With no one to protect and look out for, I was weak. Karl was taller than me but spindly, older of course, but fearful. He suffered from fevers that kept him in a stupurous dream state and was sensitive to loud sounds, harsh lights. My mother called him delicate, but I was the opposite. (5)

This novel begins with the disembodied third-person voice, a proprietary consciousness which returns to close off every chapter of direct discourse. This narrative shift from first person to third person is a storytelling device we frequently encounter in films in which the first-person narrator yields to the form of narration that we associate with the cinema, the disembodied eye. "On a cold spring morning in 1932 the train brought both an addition and a subtraction" (1). Already we have an indication that we have a polarization, a difference, which usually means a hierarchy. For instance, "addition" and "subtraction" cannot be used in this culture without some value attached. The terms here refer to Mary and Karl Adare, brother and sister. Traditionally, in patriarchal, dichotimized culture, the positive pole is attached to the masculine, the negative to the feminine. But here addition is used to refer to Mary, we assume because she stays and becomes a strong presence in the town. Karl, on the other hand, flees the town in fear and exists in absentia, in a vague connection to Dot, Mary, Celestine, and Wallace.

Dot, Celestine and Karl's daughter, is nearly the androgyne archetype, a balancing out of all the novel's other characters into an androgynous whole. The Beet Queen moves between the feminine and the masculine voice and ends with Dot's voice in the final chapter. Wallace Pfef, Karl's lover, acted as an Uncle or a godfather to Dot noted that Dot had her mother, Celestine's, strength, Mary's stubbornness, her father's vulnerability, and Sita's vanity crowded into her. Dot is solid and fearless, but at times falls victim to her intense emotions and passions. When her father Karl meets Dot as a teenager he is struck by the odd combination of femininity and masculinity, the solidness, the boldness, the powerful neck combined with all the trappings of femininty: the dangling hoop earrings,

the tight short skirt, the rouge and the orange make-up foundation. When Wallace tries to set her up as the Beet Queen, she attempts to conform to the expectations of a beauty queen: "I begin my windshield-wiper wave, as instructed by our gym teacher, who has been a contestant for Miss North Dakota. Back and forth very slowly. Smile, smile, smile" (331). But Dot does not do well in following the rules of the gender game, first apparent when she has a crush on one of the boys in the school play. Dot does not resort to the tricks of the trade. She is not sweet, cunning and demure. She demands his affections in return. When he does not respond to her overtures, she hits him over the head. Dot's sense of herself is not limited by societally imposed ideas of femininity and womanhood. Her socialization and acculturation is significantly different given her very non-traditional upbringing. She is raised by Celestine, a strong and independent woman, and also by Mary Adare, her aunt. Wallace Pfef, a soft, sensitive, and effeminate man also has a role in her upbringing. It appears that the two Chippewas from her mother's side of the family, Eli and Russell, also played an important role in contributing to her growth, doing all those things with her that fathers traditionally do with their sons. So when Karl, Dot's runaway father, asks her mother if Dot has any male influence in her life, he is unwittingly asking a complicated and funny question.

In Dot's chapter, the final one, there exists a strong cross-current of feminine and masculine instinct. She is at times patient and passive, and at other times fiercely aggressive. Her dual nature is noted in the previous chapter in the conflicting perceptions of her by her mother and her aunt. To Mary, Dot looks feminine and "ravishing." To her Aunt, Dot resembles an ancient pagan goddess. She sees the sun reflecting off Dot's "hairdo." To Celestine, however, Dot looks unnatural and uncomfortable in the excessively feminine clothing. Her posture is masculine, hunched over. Her mother also notices that her hands are curled into fists, suggesting imminent aggression. And instead of looking shyly and demurely down - the downward glance is appropriately female - Celestine sees her daughter, head up, looking off into the sky. The upward glance is appropriately masculine; it is challenging, bold and assertive.

In Dot's chapter we meet a sensibility in which the feminine is struggling against the masculine. Instead of facing the humiliation of being awarded in a fixed race that she doesn't even want to be in, she flees. In her own assessment, Dot sees a pattern that began with her grandmother Adelaide, carried on through her father Karl, and which she finds arrived at her—flight. But Dot soon realizes that she is strong, that the impulse to flee has only partly taken hold of her, that it competes with an equally strong impulse to stay, to confront reality. In Dot's chapter there are repeated references to seeing, and particularly seeing clearly: "And then little by little things start coming clear. I am facing

up to reality...." And then later, when she's in the plane and frightened that she's going to crash, "I decide, when we finally descend, to die with my eyes wide open. So I see everything..." (336). Dot has both the assiduous realistic sensibilty of Celestine, her mother, that competes with the romantic sensibility of her father. The chapter closes on an ambiguous note. Dot walks back home from the parade and sees her father's car parked in Wallace's driveway, "ready for a smooth exit," something she just discovered that she is incapable of. She desires to lean on her mother the way that Karl would lean on Wallace, but in her fierce independence she doesn't allow herself to do this. She yields herself to a feminine passivity, as the word "letting" is used repeatedly in this passage. As she lies in bed she imagines her mother in the room next to her doing the very thing she is, the thing that characterizes and authenticates femininity: waiting. "I breathe [the wind] in, and I think of her lying in the next room, her covers thrown back too, eyes wide open, waiting" (338).

I propose that Erdrich is part of a tradition of feminist writing which aspires to help us understand ourselves anew and redefine ourselves and our culture. For Native American culture as well as for female culture, deconstructing previous myths and stories and constructing new ones is a matter of life and death, and those stories must be in language and imagery that is more flexible than that which was handed to us. In her female characters we find the female creatrix, women giving birth, unaided by men. But always counterposed with the creatrix is the destroyer, women who are butchers and hunters and murderers, figures rarely attached to the feminine.

Certainly androgyny as a concept is not wholeheartedly embraced by all feminists as a liberating force against sex-role stereotyping. Some feminist writers, particularly Adrienne Rich, are suspicious of the concept as a sexist myth in disguise. They fear that androgyny is the annexation of the feminine by males to make males more versatile and therefore more powerful. Rich is suspicious about the structure of the word itself, the physical ordering of andros before gyne, the priority of one over the other (30).

Erdrich's deconstruction of gender and the use of androgynous figures are part of a larger concern that is a common link in feminist novels: the concern over compartmentalization and fragmentation. So many feminist novels critique the adoption of roles because role-playing necessarily implies the narrowing of the personality; it is one form of compartmentalization. Erdrich's writing insists that male and female not be compartmentalized; they urge an overturning of rigid roles and a freer distribution of gender traits between the sexes, a better integration of male and female principles. In Erdrich's novels, wholeness requires an acceptance of contradiction and disorder, whether it is cultural or gender-related.

NOTES

[1] Levi-Strauss, Claude. Structural Anthropology. New York: Basic Books, 1958, 61. Deconstructionist and feminists have criticized Levi-Strauss in similar terms. Derrida, in his lecture, "Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences," (Writing and Difference, 1967, trans. 1978), suggested a disruption in the very idea of structure as a stable system, quoting Levi-Strauss against himself.

[2] Ortner, Sherri B. "Is female to male as nature is to culture?" Women, Culture, and Society, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere. Stanford: 1974, 67-87. Ortner's work is part of a larger revision of structuralist assumptions.

[3] Newton, Esther. "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman," in Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society. (1984): 9, 4, 557-575.

[4] Hess, Beth B. and Myra Marx Ferree, eds. Analyzing Gender: A Handbook of Social Science Research. Newbury Park, California: SAGE Publications, 1987. This essay was helpful in providing a survey of recent research in anthropology.

[5] Excerpted from Race, Gender and Work: A Multicultural Economic History of Women in the United States. Amott, Teresa and Julie Matthaei, forthcoming from South End Press, 116 Saint Botolph Street, Boston. This article was excerpted from Ms. Magazine June 1989: 23-25.

CHAPTER IV

' MY NAME WAS NO MORE THAN A CRUMBLING SKIN': THE STRUGGLE FOR SELF-DEFINITION AND IDENTITY IN ERDRICH'S FICTIONAL UNIVERSE

Particularly for many women writers like Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston and Maxine Hong Kingston, identity is a recurring and troubling issue. In Erdrich's work, identity is an issue that moves in and out of three systems: gender systems, religion and culture, and family. For Erdrich's characters, these are quagmires of contradiction and ambiguity. Most of her characters are replete with conflict, suspended in a world between Christianity and Shamanism, between ill-defined family ties and loosely defined gender roles. In this chapter I will examine how Erdrich deals with the issue of fragmented identities, both thematically, in the characters of Pauline and Nector Kashpaw, and stylistically, in the lack of any unifying consciousness in any of the novels. I hope to show that identity is problematic for most of her characters, but especially for those who are cut off from their past. I will also examine how ritual, a process that is basic to Native American cultural life, serves to heal threatened identities and is a means of self-definition for at least a few of her characters. Although I am committed to reading Erdrich from a feminist point of view, in this chapter I look at the issue at hand not merely from a feminist perspective, for to do so would minimize cultural questions. It is possible to understand that gender and culture serve equally in the process of self-definition; indeed here, I give much more weight to cultural issues. Furthermore, although women tend to hold a central space in Erdrich's writing, she is able to render with insight men's lives; nearly half the chapters are narrated by men and serve to explore male personality and identity.

When I use the word "identification" I am aware of the confusion it might precipitate as it belongs to a broad semantic field ranging from everyday usage to philosophy to psychoanalysis. For the most part, I use it in its everyday sense as it relates to "identity" or the collective set of characteristics by which a person is recognizable or known.

This problem surrounding identity is, as I have noted, a defining characteristic of writing by women. Toni Morrison's Sula deals with the difficulties surrounding the sense of an autonomous and real self. Nel, refusing the identity conferred upon her and feeling a disconnectedness with

her mother, says to herself, "I'm not Nel. I'm me." The relationship that Nel builds with her best friend Sula is necessary for her sense of a developing self as the relationship with her own mother is unsatisfactory in so many ways. Understanding the nature of the relationship between Nel and Sula requires an understanding of the trajectory of female development and identity formation. Female psycho-social development is different from that of males: the female need for separation from the mother and individuation comes into to conflict with the need for identification and fusion with the mother. Male separation from the mother is eased by both the fear of paternal punishment and the benefits of identification with a male figure. For women the balance of separation and identification is troublesome, and therefore the strong presence of another female figure provides the necessary mirroring for self-development.

Zora Neale Hurston, also deals with the difficulty of identity in Their Eyes Were Watching God. In this novel, the narrator, Janie, talks of having looked at a picture and having not been able to identify herself until somebody pointed out her image in a group photograph.

> So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed
> out there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl
> with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where Ah wuz
> s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me.
> So Ah ast, 'where is me? Ah don't see me.' (9)

This is the beginning of the development of Janie's consciousness, her emerging identity, her emerging self. And this quest for self-development is vital for her, and the novel's trajectory follows the course of her strengthening self-definition.

For Erdrich's characters as with Morisson's and Hurston's, the struggle is with the self as an autonomous and complete identity and the self as part of a group. For most of her characters, the issue is one of personal, familial and cultural identity, perhaps most notably in Pauline of Tracks. Pauline Kashpaw, a mixed blood, struggles throughout with the issue of identity. Pauline is a breed who struggles to unify her identity by attempting to sever her ties with Native American culture and completely embracing white Christian culture. Pauline, from the beginning of her narrative, finds her mixed identity untenable and decides to detach from Native culture:

> I wanted to be like my mother, who showed her half-white.
> I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian...I would
> not speak our language. In English I told my father we should
> build an outhouse with a door that swung open and shut. (14)

Her story can be read as one of self-dissolution; but, as I will elaborate later on, this reading can be undone by an alternative reading which focuses on ritual as an act of self-creation, or, as in Pauline's case, an act of self-recreation. Pauline's narrative is one of transformation in the death of Pauline and the birth of Sister Leopolda. Like all rituals, this process involves the cessation of a previous state and the inception of another. In my first reading I trace the disintegration of Pauline's identity. The dissolution, though gradual, acclerates at various important symbolic moments in the text. Her struggle largely has to do with her ambiguous history, a blurry memory, a loose connection to what she once was: "...the Puyats were known as a quiet family with little to say. We were mixed-bloods, skinners in the clan for which the name was lost" (14). Unlike Janie in Hurston's novel whose sense of herself strengthens as the narrative progresses, Pauline gradually loses any kind of stable identity, and the fissures in her identity that are apparent at the outset deepen the more she loses contact with her past. Nanapush recognizes the danger to Pauline of her loose connection to her past, her crumbling sense of self and identity, and how it affects her psyche:

> ...I could not cast the Puyat from my mind.
> You might not remember what people I'm talking about, the skinners, of whom Pauline was the only trace of those who died and scattered... 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 where she fit or how to think when she was around...there was some question if she wasn't afflicted, touched in the mind...she got peculiar, blacked out and couldn't sleep, saw things that weren't in the room...(38-39)

It appears that Pauline's dissolving identity and creeping madness is accompanied by a steady movement away from Shamanic culture toward Christianity. For the first half of the novel she hangs precariously between the two cultures, her identity split in half, but as the novel progresses she attempts to distance herself from Native culture, and the adaptation of Christianity to her own life takes a twisted form. The split in her identity is characterized symbolically by the crucifix that she hangs in the corner of her bedroom next to a "dreamcatcher," a shamanic symbolic instrument, a hoop of light split ash and catgut web used to protect one's self from nightmares. The first significant symbolic break with her Native past we encounter is when she takes on the responsibility for attending the bedside of the dying. She attends the death of a girl nearly her age, and apparently overwhelmed at watching her own people vanish one by one as her own family had, she attempts to cut her ties with her own culture and takes on a Christian

philosophy toward death, one which neither fears nor abhors death, but welcomes it as a form of grace, as relief from this life. The death of Mary Pepewas, which Pauline attends at this point in the narrative, serves an important symbolic function. Mary had been a childhood friend to Pauline and had attended the Mission school with her. But as Pauline's attachment to her own past is a tenuous one, she has trouble recalling much about Mary: "I tried to remember something Mary had done or said, some detail" (67). When Pauline reaches out into the air between them, and "cut[s] where the rope was frayed down to a string," she symbolically severs her ties with her past. With no ties, no memories, no past, Pauline feels empty and light, and with no memories she could now sleep peacefully, black and dreamless. Moving further away from her own people, becoming, ironically, more intolerant and spiteful, she moves toward Christianity. She begins to wear the nun's habits, not her own, but, appropriately, their "castoffs." And in renouncing her cultural identity and assuming another, she becomes invisible. Next to Fleur, who appears from Pauline's and Nanapush's reportage to have a very strong sense of herself, a strong tie to her past, to her culture, Pauline fades into invisibility, something that comes as a mild shock at first:

> I put the coins on [Fleur's] palm and then I melted back to nothing, part of the walls and tables...it wasn't long before I understood something that I didn't know then... the men would not have seen me no matter what I did, how I moved. For...forgetting my family had hardened my face...(20)

Her sense of her invisibility becomes stronger when she starts wearing her black habit: "I was more invisible than ever in my black clothes" (75). Pauline's identity becomes more and more associated with the idea of invisibility as she assumes a Christian identity: "I stood watching...so intent that I ceased to breathe and turned invisible, clear like water, thin as glass, so that my presence was finally nothing more than a slight distortion of the air" (161).

As Pauline's narrative develops, veracity becomes more problematic. She relates and conveys events that transcend the bounds of reality and which no other character is able to corroborate because she alone bore witness. As readers we can reject these events as the fabrications of one who is losing her hold on reality. But as Pauline cuts that tie, she also is cutting her hold on reality, and in a way, transcends that reality and offers us her truth, a truth borne not out of the details of everyday life but the truth of fiction. Her truth is invented or imagined and perhaps not understood as a prevarication but as fiction. With no way to resolve the

conflicts that characterize her experience, she writes (or speaks) beyond herself. As Nanapush says, "the practice of deception was so constant with her that it got to be a kind of truth" (53). In either case, shorn of any stable identity, Pauline struggles to create a unified identity for herself but creates one rife with conflict: "I had the merciful scavenger's heart. I became devious and holy, dangerously meek and mild" (69).

Further in the story, Pauline becomes pregnant with Napoleon's child of which she wishes to rid herself because she imagines herself saintlike, betrothed to God. She thinks the child is evil, conceived by the Devil, and fights during labor to keep the child inside of her. When the child is finally delivered against her will, Pauline, like the break she made from her past, severs her ties with her daughter, seeing her as defiled and misinterpreting the bruises on the child's temples:

> 'Look,' I said. 'She's marked by the devil's thumbs.'
> 'No, she's not,' said Bernadette. 'Take her. Put her to your breast.'
> But the child was already fallen, a dark thing, and I could
> not bear the thought. I turned away. (136)

Having no continuity with her past, no connection from her past to her present, the future, in the form of her child, can only be a repetition of the past: painful, abhorent and unwelcome.

After the birth of her child and her decision to give her away (she names her Marie for the Virgin mother), Pauline turns further away from her self and her culture and immerses herself more deeply into Christianity with a fervor that exceeds even that of some of the saints. Pauline goes beyond the limits of acceptable martyrdom, wearing a set of underwear made out of potato sacks because the chafing reminds her of Christ's sacrifice, or, to remind her of Christ's imprisonment, she wears her shoes on the wrong feet. Indeed, her "Christian" behavior becomes so excessive that it becomes parodic, and the Mother Superior has to dissuade her from her "unusual penances." Pauline becomes more "Christian" than the nuns at the convent. Another attempt to split from her Native identity comes one night when she is praying. And here the issue of identity, which has plagued her throughout, surfaces again, and, it is in this context that she attempts to entirely renounce Native culture:

> 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....'the Indians,' I
> said now, 'them.' Never *neenawind* or us. (137-138)

The split in her identity is symbolized in her own observation, "I noticed that my own shadow

moved when I did not, which was often how Satan revealed himself" (139). As much as Pauline wishes to disown what is hers both familially and culturally, she cannot quite escape her old way of construing experience which is inseparable from how she constructs herself, through narrative, to which I will now turn.

In the first part of Tracks Pauline narrates the early life of Fleur through a network of references to Chippewa lake beings, magical animals and Native American social practices. Pauline narrates herself with a Chippewa referential system. In the Western tradition, individual identity is often thought of in the context of individual psychology. Personality types are encoded into psychoanalytic categories which often can be traced to our own cultural myths, e.g., narcissism. But in Erdrich's universe, personality is evoked by syntagmatic chains of references to natural elements, such as water, or animals. Fleur is repeatedly evoked through references to wolves, and Pauline evokes herself through references to scavenging birds: "[I] knew the truth and perched on it" (85). In her dream-vision, she sees herself rise up like a bird: "I rose in three powerful beats and saw what lay below...I touched down on my favorite branch and tucked my head beneath the shelter of my wing" (69). Elements of the Shamanic network of references, such as the lake monster, become twisted and deformed with Pauline's imposition of a Christian cosmology. As Catherine Rainwater points out, according to Chippewa belief, the lake monster is a frightening but appeasable entity (409). When Pauline becomes a nun, she still believes in the lake monster, but she calls him Satan. Pauline's twisted version of the lake monster becomes a thing worse than either culture could contain within its own system: her own amalgamation is worse than the Christian Satan, who is not appeasable but who cannot victimize the truly innocent, or the Chippewa monster, who can capture the innocent but is appeasable. The day before her entrance into the Church as novice she goes back to the reservation and out onto the lake for one last struggle with the lake monster, determined to beat it. She goes out to the middle of the semi-frozen lake, while a crowd, a mix of convent sisters and Pauline's relatives, gathers on the shore to implore her to come back. Damned up with feelings of grandiosity, she regards all of them, the Christians and her family on shore, as disdainfully small: "This was how God felt: beyond hindrance or reach" (198). She believes it her mission to kill this lake monster, a trope which eventually comes to represent everything of Shamanic culture to her: "I was determined to wait for my tempter, the one who enslaved the ignorant, who damned them with belief. My resolve was to transfix him with the cross" (200). The boat is finally drawn to shore (probably by

Napoleon Morrissey), and, in her madness, she mistakes Napoleon for the Satanic lake monster. Filled with preternatural strength, she wrestles Napoleon to the ground and strangles him to death with her rosary beads.

Pauline's narrative ends with what she thinks is the complete and final destruction of her Native identity and the adoption of a Christian one. She prays to be granted the grace to leave her past and her identity as Pauline behind. She has to convince herself that her name, any name, is no more than a crumbling skin. But Pauline's narrative ends in ambiguity, revealed by the last words of her narrative: "Leopolda. I tried out the unfamiliar syllables. They fit. They cracked in my ears like a fist through ice" (205). The contradiction between the comfort of "they fit" and the pain of "like a fist through ice," is unresolvable, two tropes that Pauline in her madness brings together but cannot synthesize, just as she is unable to synthesize her past with her present, her Shamanic tradition with Christianity, and finally, just as she is unable to integrate and synthesize a coherent sense of identity.

In Tracks, in which Pauline's narrative is embedded, we understand that storytelling, at least from Nanapush's perspective, has much to do with the formation of one's identity and self-definition. Storytelling itself is a ritual, and stories are the narrative counterpart to ritual. Just as one reading reveals Pauline attempting and failing to establish a coherent sense of identity, we can also find in Pauline's narrative something of a ritual: her act of self-naming is a ritual of self-creation and empowerment. Nanapush is concerned with Lulu's development of identity and hence he brings her her mother's story since her mother cannot do it herself. But we have to wonder then, in a narrative in which at least one storytelling act (Nanapush's) is undertaken for the sake of self-definition (Lulu's), what is Pauline's storytelling doing for her? We can read Pauline's story as a story of the disintegration of the self, as the destruction of an identity. But intertwined with this is the creation of a new identity. Is Pauline's narrative a story of self-creation and empowerment? To Nanapush and the others, Pauline's creation of a new identity is a form of madness, a death even, but to Pauline it is a form of empowerment, for she does gain a dangerous raw power in the adoption of Sister Leopolda, for by assuming her new name, she is conferring upon herself the power of naming. The killing off of Pauline is ironically a source of empowerment for Pauline, an embracing of the inevitable. Pauline is a "breed" who, like so many of Erdrich's characters, is searching for her identity, and telling her story is her means of getting there. Or perhaps, as Rayna Green says in the introduction to That's What She Said, a collection

of writing by Native women, the "breed" stands in the middle and interprets (23). But I don't think that is true here: I think Pauline's story can be read as a creative act. Identity, as Green says, is not merely a matter of birthright or genetics as it once was long ago. Identity, for both Pauline and Nector, is a choice that has to be made, a matter of will, "a face to be shaped in a ceremonial act" (23). The taking of new names and the reshaping of old names is part of the process of becoming. Green notes that receiving names, taking new names, giving names, realizing you own names you never knew—are all part of a vital religious process for Native people.

For Nector Kashpaw too, identity is a troubling notion. Nector and Pauline are not only products of colliding cultures, but they are cut off from their past. But it is not just their past per se, but that part of their past which is Indian. Both Nector and Pauline are unable to integrate and synthesize their divergent cultural make-up. In Pauline's case, the break with the past is more volitional, but in either case, the denial and suppression of their Native American ties produce pathologies. Those characters who better integrate the disparate cultures are better able to maintain a psychic wholeness, such as Nanapush was; although he had a Jesuit education, he is very aware of the importance of his Indian culture in his psychospiritual formation. We learn at the beginning of Love Medicine from Albertine that Nector loses his mind later in his life. She talks of the two Kashpaw twins, Nector and Eli. Their mother was Margaret Kashpaw and we learn from Albertine that Margaret had a different agenda for each son. Nector, she had decided, was to go to the government school, while Eli she hidden away from the government. Nector, we are told, learned "white reading and writing, while Eli knew the woods" (LM 17). She goes on to add that it was "hard to tell why or how, my Great-uncle Eli was still sharp, while Grandpa's [Nector] mind had left us, gone wary and wild" (17). Albertine longs for stories from the past, stories about her aunt June and stories about all of Nector's political victories as tribal chief. What she is longing for is what Lulu had gotten from Nanapush in Tracks: stories of empowerment. Nector's failed memory stands in stark contrast to Eli's, who, at the same age, recalls vividly a story about June and the bath-oil beads that he had given her. But Nector, cut off from his past, is dismissed and disempowered in his old age. People ignored Nector and talked over his disjointed statements. And Albertine senses that this loss of memory, perhaps like all lapses in memory, was willed, something to protect him and absolve him from whatever threatened him. But to lose memory of one's past is not to protect oneself from it: it rather makes one vulnerable to it, vulnerable to blind repetition, making one incapable of change and growth. Nector can only think of June as the girl who ate wild plums, but he forgets all the rich details of June's early life.

He does not share with Albertine the wildness, boldness and defiance that others had seen in June. Because of his faulty memory, Nector was unable to do for Albertine what Nanapush had done for Lulu: provide her with a sense of continuity, a story from which he might have provided her some insight into her own wildness, fearlessness, and strength.

We know too from Nector himself that he had grown distant from his own culture. Though he retained an important political position as tribe leader, the education that he had received and the language he was forced to learn at the government schools served to alienate him from his own culture, and in turn, from himself. In the "Plunge of the Brave" chapter in Love Medicine, Nector goes on at good length, unself-consciously, about himself. And it is very revealing. The title of the chapter warrants our attention. "The Plunge of the Brave" refers to a painting for which Nector posed. A white woman solicited Nector and brought him back to her house so that she could paint a portrait of him entitled "Plunge of the Brave." Nector, it seems, had classical Indian features as he was often cast in Westerns, in which his roles always turned out to be a disappointment: "Death was the extent of Indian acting in the movie theatre" (90). When Nector and the old white woman are in the barn which served as her studio, she orders him to disrobe. Nector begins to feel indignant and attempts to frustrate her by playing into the stupid savage role. He pretends not to understand her. "What robe?" he answers, revealing his ability to retain a sense of humor despite his feelings of humiliation. He hedges when she demands that every article of clothing come off until she offers enough money, "so much that [Nector] had to forget his dignity" (90). Nector then allows her to paint the picture and recalls his dismay seeing it later, hanging in the Bismark state capitol: "There I was, jumping off a cliff, naked of course, down into a rocky river. Certain death. Remember Custer's saying? The only good Indian is a dead Indian?" (91). Nector is complicit, then, in his being reduced to caricature. He assists the old white woman in the creation and perpetuation of the noble savage myth, the appealing but doomed victim of the inevitable evolution of humanity from primitive to post-industrial socialorders — the root cause of the genocide practiced against Indians. On a ride home in a boxcar one night not long after seeing his portrait, Nector thinks to himself that he would fool the old woman and not plunge downward to his death, that indeed he would survive: "I'd hold my breath when I hit and let the current pull me toward the surface, around jagged rocks. I wouldn't fight it, and in that way I'd get to shore" (91). Nector seems to suggest that what the old white woman does not understand about these doomed people is their ability to endure despite the genocide waged against them.

Nector talks about his education at the government school: "I kept thinking about the one book I read in high school. For some reason this priest in Flandreau would teach no other book all four years but Moby Dick..." (91). It is no coincidence that Erdrich makes reference to *the* great American novel, and that one of her characters finds himself in its "universal" types, Ishmael and Captain Ahab. Early in the chapter Nector thinks of himself as being like Ishmael, the shallowly optimistic Nantucketeer; Ishmael, he is taught to believe by the priest, represents average, goodhearted humanity. Furthermore, Moby Dick is a tragedy (or it is often categorized as such, but there are generic arguments afoot), a genre that is born out of Western thinking, a Western worldview, unfamiliar to Shamanic codes. According to George Steiner, tragedy as a form is not universal. Oriental art knows violence, grief, and the strike of disaster. But the representation of personal suffering and heroism which we call tragedy is distinctive of the Western tradition. Tragedy, and the tragic worldview is deeply ingrained in the Western spirit; a vision of humanity that is decidedly Western. Erdrich's point is well taken: the great American novel does not speak to a vast majority of Americans, though it does hold a secure place in the canon. It is a white, male novel that exists in a white male tradition and deals with themes that are white and male. It is no wonder that Nector Kashpaw has identity issues, forced fed literature that is supposed to be representative, literature that is supposed to be universal, and in which he cannot find himself or anything resembling his own experience.

Early in his chapter Nector thinks of himself as Ishmael, but then later dismisses that assessment of his own character and replaces Ishmael with Captain Ahab: "Perhaps I was wrong, about Ishmael I mean, for now I see signs of the captain in myself." But this is a false projection of himself, a horrible misassessment of himself. Assigned no other book but Moby Dick all four years of high school, Nector is taught that there is no experience other than white male experience. There are no Captain Ahab's in Erdrich's fictional universe, only anti-heroes, no great tragic heroic figures, but figures who are life-size. Denied a cultural framework that is relevant to his life experience, Nector, like all the other Native Americans, is forced into an educational system that mandates a cultural network that is irrelevant to his experience, within which it is impossible to foster a coherent sense of self. Nector, with no stable and discernible identity, is not an actor in his own story. Inextricable from the notion of acting is the idea of a Self from which emanates desire and will. Captain Ahab, the tragic hero, had an indomitable will. Nector is without will: in his chapter he falls into paralysis, repeatedly. Looking back at his life he realizes that he has never made a decision, that he just did what came along, went wherever he was

taken, accepted when he was called on. Following this reflection, Nector's monologue in the rest of the chapter reveals a man riddled with uncertainty, a crushed will, and an overwhelming inability to act:

> ...I pitch and strain at the wood, splitting with a wedge and laying hard into the ax, as if, when the pile gets big enough, *it will tell me what to do...* (107)
>
> I swear that *I do nothing* to help the fire along. (109)
>
> *I have done nothing.* (109)
>
> *I can do nothing* but stare, rooted to the ground. (110)

Seeing himself created into a caricature, unable to find himself in universal types, Nector finds himself bereft of any stable identity, an incomplete self without will. Nector, like Pauline, finds the struggle for self-definition so difficult because of his murky tie to his Native past.

If Nector were to turn to other works of mainstream American literature to find himself rendered, he might unhappily find several Indian novels in which he would only find a different expression of the same story told by the old woman's painting, e.g., James Fenimore Cooper's The Last of the Mohicans, or Frank Water's The Man Who Killed the Deer. Paula Gunn Allen notes that there is a tradition in American literature about Natives in which "the typical plot line depicts a Native trying to adopt or adapt to white ways or values and ends tragically as a result" (77). The writers see the conflict of cultures as destructive to the protagonists and cast these characters as victims of inevitable historical forces. These novels seem to imply that it is mortally dangerous for Indians to try to make it in a white man's world, and those who try in any sense are doomed to death. These novels stereotype Indians into earth -worshiping primitives and the literature generally reflects Western-European perceptions of tribal lives and worldviews, perceptions that are excessively simple and reductionist, and focus less on the supposed disappearance of Indians than on white guilt and grief. Indian life serves as a nice backdrop for a white drama. The dying savage was a popular theme because it was so marketable. At the core of these novels is cultural conflict because conflict is an essential aspect of white fiction, but Allen points out, conflict is not indigenous to Indian narrative; it is ritual, rather, which is the fiber of Indian narrative. Although Erdrich's fiction does focus on cultural conflict, she marries conflict to ritual, allowing various characters to participate in a ritual tradition that helps to restore the sense

of self and identity. It is by ritual that Natives define themselves; it is ritual rather than politics and language that is the essence of tribal life. And it is ritual that gives shape to their lives and their stories. Native American narratives are not structured in the same way western novels are: tribal narratives are not tied to linear development, a main character or event. Their narratives thus turn out to be circular in structure, incorporating event within event, meaning on top of meaning until accumulation finally results in a story. Many contemporary Native American novels reflect a tribal worldview and the ritual tradition: they tend to be ritualistic in approach, structure, theme, symbol and significance. Erdrich's fiction tends to marry tribal narrative technique to western narrative plotting; there is some clear linear progression and a lot of lateral shifting; and in many of the narratives conflict is undermined by continuance. Unlike the writings of other Native Americans, Erdrich's novels are not rituals or ritualistic in any structural way; rather, several of her characters integrate ritual and various elements of white mainstream culture into something meaningful to them. For at least two of her characters, Eli and Lipsha, ritual serves a healing function by strengthening their self-definition.

Allen defines ritual as "a procedure whose purpose is to transform someone or something from one condition or state to another" (80). In the transformative process, the prior state or condition must cease to exist. When Pauline transforms herself from Pauline to Sister Leopolda, she asks God, "for the grace to accept, to leave Pauline behind, to remember that my name, any name, was no more than a crumbling skin" (205). Consciously or unconsciously, Pauline is participating in a naming ritual very much rooted in Native culture. Despite her desire to leave her past behind she is unable to part with the ritual process.

Allen tells us that ritual in Native cultures are gender-based, but this gender distinction is to be understood more as a complementarity than a division. Women's rituals and lore tend to be centered around birth, death, food, householding and medicine, whereas men's are focused on risk and death. Pauline is involved in both birth and death rituals. Ritual is the source of Pauline's psychic and spiritual identity, a source she is unable to jettison. Lipsha Morrissey too, albeit unsuccessfully, attempts to carry off a healing ritual in the "Love Medicine" chapter of Love Medicine. The process is to transform his grandfather from a state of dispassion for his grandmother to one of strong passion. His grandfather chokes on the turkey hearts that Lipsha uses in the healing process and dies. Lipsha wonders whether his failure was a result of his essential split from his past: he takes many shortcuts that his ancestors surely would not have taken, e.g., buying the turkey hearts frozen instead of taking them live from the animal, and then blessing

them with the holy water from the church. The story becomes one, really, of Lipsha's transformation from this experience. Though the ritual is a failure in one sense, it is successful insofar as he gains self-understanding. He sees and embraces the irony that characterizes his life and the lives of his grandparents. In the last few pages of the chapter he sees a strength in his grandmother, a recognition that pushes him toward an understanding. His grandmother takes the rosary beads off her bedpost and puts them in Lipsha's hands. "I almost cried when she did this...I didn't understand, except her hand was so strong, squeezing mine" (214). He then goes into the grass and in the process of pulling up the dandelions, he becomes "kin to its secret lesson" (215). He comes to the understanding that his family, like the weeds, are like "a nuisance people dig up and throw in the sun to wither. A globe of frail seeds that's indestructible" (215).

Interestingly, unlike most of the characters in an Erdrich novel, Nector makes no mention of his mother or father, grandfathers or grandmothers. He does not seem rooted by way of story to family. Whereas Lipsha comes to a great deal of self-understanding and understanding of life in the story of his grandparents, Nector has no family stories from which to draw upon. As I had mentioned earlier, storytelling itself is a ritual, and stories are the narrative counterpart to ritual. Nanapush's storytelling in Tracks serves the function of informing and transforming Lulu; storytelling enables individuals to realize that the significance of their own lives is integrally related to the lives of all the others who share the same psychospiritual tradition. It is the storytelling about Fleur in Tracks and about June in Love Medicine which becomes a ritual, a process which serves to strengthen various characters' understanding of themselves.

An important ritual that takes place is the one that Eli participates in with Nanapush, the hunting ritual in Tracks. After Eli has been kicked out of Fleur's house because of his infidelity, he is unable to win her back and must go live with Nanapush. It is in the dead of a North Dakota winter and the two are without food. Nanapush sends Eli out to hunt moose, but it is a task that Eli cannot perform without the spiritual guidance of Nanapush. When Eli leaves, Nanapush lays down and blackens his face with a lump of charcoal, places an otter bag on his chest, and begins to sing. In his vision Nanapush connects with Eli, who up until then had been wandering aimlessly. Nanapush assists Eli in gaining his own vision, enabling him to find the moose. Eli finds the moose and takes aim and shoots. "The scrub it stood within was difficult and dense all around, ready to deflect Eli's bullet. But my song directed it to fly true" (103). Then Nanapush describes in great detail, step by step, how Eli carves up the animal and brings it home. When at last home, the hunting ritual complete, they fall together on the food and devour it. Nanapush is

out of his dream state and turns to Eli: "You're my son," I said, moved by the scorched taste, "you're my relative" (105). Ritual for both Nanapush and Eli is a vehicle for self-definition and the establishment of family identity. Eli is healed and empowered by this ritual, and he is able to return to Fleur and humble himself at her doorstep, having a much stronger sense of himself.

Identity is not only formed by cultural context, but also by familial connection and gender roles, two other areas that Erdrich problematizes. The confusion that many of Erdrich's characters experience in relation to who they are is recreated in the reader by narrative strategies which obscure relationships between people. Characters' relationships to one another in Erdrich's novels seem interchangeable and labels seem insignificant; there is no need to discern between "blood children" and "took-ins." The "I" of any given chapter is often difficult to place in relation to other characters. Our culture is one which confers a great deal of significance on family identity, and in a patriarchal culture, identity is more strongly informed by paternal ties than maternal. Indeed, where there is no legally identifiable father a person is "illegitimate." In Erdrich's fictional universe, the rigid rule of the patriarchal naming system breaks up. It is very difficult for readers to order characters according to surname, and families are not so much constituted by biological tie as they are by contiguity or circumstance. There is little differentiation between blood children and "took-ins." The concept that legitimate children are somehow superior or preferred over illegitimate children is largely a Western concept. Native American culture does not divide up children that way and it allows for other ties of kinship, like what we find in Lulu Lamartine's house, teeming with boys, all from different fathers. When Lipsha Morrissey goes to the nun to get a blessing for the turkey hearts, the nun pauses for a moment before she recognizes Lipsha as being the youngest of the Kashpaw's, Gordie's brother, to which he does not respond with a correction. The reader has to think back and remember that Lipsha is June's son (which we learn from Albertine Johnson earlier in the novel) whom she had abandoned to be raised by Marie Kashpaw, who had also adopted June, her niece. Gordie, the reader will also remember, was June's husband, which would make Gordie either Lipsha's father or step-father. But Lipsha does not bother to correct the nun and no authorial voice intervenes to clarify. The reader is forced to work hard to chart direct lines of descent among family members in Love Medicine. In Tracks, Nanapush tells his story to Lulu, whom he addresses at times as daughter, at other times, as granddaughter. Sister Leopolda appears first in Love Medicine when Marie Kashpaw goes back to the convent to see the old dying woman. In the next novel, The Beet Queen, she makes a

brief appearance in the schoolyard scene where Mary leaves an imprint of Christ in the snow. But we are not aware of her complete identity until we at last come to her origins in the third novel, Tracks.

Like the novels of William Faulkner, Louise Erdrich's novels are family epics, a chronicling of generations in which characters carry over from one novel to the next, but where biological ties remain somewhat obscure to the reader. Indeed, in Love Medicine biological ties are rendered insignificant and in The Beet Queen Erdrich's characters become painfully aware of the randomness of family ties. Early into the novel Mary and Karl Adare are abandoned by their mother (no mention is ever made of who Mary's biological father is, and we learn later that Karl's father was Mr. Ober, a married man with whom his mother was having an affair). Mary metaphorically kills off her mother and is raised by her Aunt Fritzie and her Uncle Pete. In Erdrich's fictional universe the nuclear family is superceded by tribal kinship systems. Karl, it seems, was raised at the orphanage run by the Catholic Church, and their step-brother, Jude, was kidnapped and raised as Jude Miller. Celestine James' line of descent is obscured too: we know that she is a mixed-blood and that her brother Russell still lives on the reservation; her father could very well have been Dutch James who lived in Argus but whom we do not find until Tracks. Her mother apparently died. Both Mary Adare, Dot's aunt, and Wallace Pfef, a friend of the family, serve a paternal function for Dot.

In the last novel, Tracks, there is some degree of clarification of the ties between people as it is set in the generation preceding the two other novels; we learn of the bitter relations between the Kashpaws and the Morrisseys, we meet the last of the Pillagers, but there is no implication that biological ties matter. The interaction between Nanapush and Lulu underscores the arbitrary nature of identifications. Nanapush addresses her as "granddaughter" and she refers to him as "uncle." But we learn that Lulu is actually Fleur Pillager's and Eli Kashpaw's daughter, and we also know that Fleur's mother and father are dead. We can conclude therefore that Nanapush is not Fleur's biological father, so he cannot be Lulu's grandfather after all. However, Nanapush saved Fleur from death, and by way of deed, he becomes her father (just as Nanapush had become Eli Kashpaw's father by way of deed), and then by extension, Lulu's grandfather. But that is not all. To further complicate relationships and identities, Nanapush declares himself Lulu's father when the government comes around to give her "legitimacy." Nanapush's decision to do so implies the same thing that Pauline's adoption of a different name

implies: that assimilation and conformity is the only alternative to extinction. Erdrich's narratives tend to undermine the significance that western culture has put on biological ties as a means of identification; rather it is friendship and love that binds characters together.

* * *

Before I go on to discuss how gender systems complicate identity, let me make a brief excursion into what French feminists such as Kristeva theorize in regard to identity issues. They approach identity from a psycholinguistic perspective, problematizing female subjectivity.

Consciousness and identity are tied up with the issue of subjectivity, problematic not only for various groups within American society, but for women as well. In the patriarchal dichotomy, women have always found themselves on the other side of the self/other dualism, and this problem with subjectivity can be traced back to the female relationship to the organizing signifier in language: the phallus. The phallus, as we will recall from Lacanian parlance, is the transcendental signifier, transcendental precisely as the primary organizer of the structure of subjectivity. Cast outside of the symbolic order, woman's subject-position has been denied. There is no self around which to organize; she can only exist as the dependent Other, whose very existence is unimaginable without his. As Helene Cixous writes:

> Without him she'd remain in a state of distressing and distressed undifferentiation, unbordered, unorganized, 'unpoliced' by the phallus...incoherent, chaotic, and embedded in the Imaginary...She's the *unorganizable* feminine construct...not recognizing herself in the images the other may or may not give her. She is given images that don't belong to her, and she forces herself, as we've all done, to resemble them...(47)

One way that feminist theorists have problematized the notion of the subject is by discussing person-in-relations rather than persons as autonmous selves. Object relations theory, another school of psychoanalytic thought with which feminists have had more friendly relations than the Freudian, focuses on contextualized psychic development, examining development in relation to primary objects (the mother, most often) rather than the various drives and pulsions that Freud focuses on, a more decontextualized theory of human psychosocial development. This school of thought offers more insight into female pyschosocial development than Freud had offered and illuminates how female psychosocial development is complicated by a woman's relation with her

mother (where the need for differentiation and individuation is at odds with the need for fusion and identification). Object relations prioritizes the pre-oedipal stages of development and the infant's fusion with the mother-object as opposed to the more conflictual oedipal stage in which the father is the more significant player. Much of Kristeva's reading of Lacan is informed by object relations theory. Furthermore, Julia Kristeva calls for a decentering of all social identities, including the dualism of men and women. In lieu of the autonomous subject Kristeva speaks instead of a subject in process: "What can "identity," even "sexual identity" mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged?" (209)

Now I will turn to Erdrich's problematizing of identity through the upsetting of gender systems. Another system for distinguishing and developing identity is through gender, but in Erdrich's fictional universe this is somewhat complicated as there is not such a rigid assignment of gender roles as there is in western tradition. So many of Erdrich's characters are androgynous, a strategy that I will explore in greater depth in the following chapter. But if we take a cursory look we will find women who have traditionally male jobs (Mary and Celestine as butchers), men who have traditionally female interests (Wallace Pfef), and several characters who have traits that we typically associate with the other sex. Erdrich underscores this with chains of references for characters that are typically adjectives belonging to the opposite sex. Men are often described as delicate and frail. Gerry, Dot's boyfriend and father to her child, is described as having a "queer delicacy" about him. "So many things Gerry did might remind you of the way that a beautiful courtesan, standing naked before a mirror, would touch herself—lovingly, conscious of her attractions" (166). Karl Adare is rendered with a typically feminine chain of associations: "His mouth was sweetly curved, his skin fine and girlish" (1). Mary, conversely, is described by adjectives that are typically male: "Her name was square and practical as the rest of her" (1). And Mary's self-understanding is shaped by the recognition of the inversion of gender roles: "It was not that with Karl gone I had no one to protect me, but just the opposite. With no one to protect and look out for, I was weak. Karl was taller than me but spindly, older of course, but fearful. He suffered from fevers that kept him in a stuporous dream state and was sensitive to loud sounds, harsh lights. My mother called him delicate, but I was the opposite" (5). This is a problem for many women: a woman's subjective experience may tell her that she does not feel delicate, but culture dictates that because she is a woman she ought to feel delicate.

Karl's repeated homosexual encounters also undermine the rigid orthodoxy of gender roles.

Karl's first homosexual encounter occurs when he is a teenager. After fleeing Argus in fear, Karl ends up back on the boxcar with an older man. When the man first meets Karl he is convinced that Karl is a girl, and only later, when Karl seduces the older man, does he realize upon physical contact that Karl is indeed a boy. In the lovemaking scene, Karl assumes a passive, feminine role: "Karl felt the breath from Giles's lips and tipped his mouth up to kiss him...Giles rolled on top of him and pinned him deep in the hay. Karl shivered then flushed warm when Giles began. 'You're no girl,' Giles mumbled into Karl's hair, then he kissed Karl on the throat and began to touch him in a new way...until Karl's body tightened unbearably and then let loose, abruptly, in a long dark pulse...they lay together, side by side, both looking up into the sound of the grain, and Karl was certain of what he felt. 'I love you,' Karl said" (25). Wallace Pfef is aware too that there is a split in his gender identification. He feels very much like father to Dot, but very much like a wife to Karl, waiting passively for him to come back to Argus. When Karl calls to let Wallace know that he's coming to Argus to visit, Wallace stays up all night cleaning the house. He primps himself for the occasion: "I had put on pajamas, a quilted silk smoking jacket, tasseled slippers" (164).

Gender is another system by which we build self-definition. Unfortunately, there is little flexibilty in our culture that would allow individuals a more balanced sexual identity; our culture endows gender with rigid prescriptions for behavior. Though a character may be biologically determined, that character may have the sensibilities or the sexual orientation that is typically assigned to the other sex by our culture. If they are biologically determined and psychologically underdetermined or undetermined in regard to gender identification, the result is a dissonance which our culture is unwilling and unable to accept.

* * *

I will now look at how the problematic of identity and self-definition are treated structurally. Twentieth century American literature is characterized by the fragmentation that serves to reflect a culture that is unbounded, complex, chaotic, and fragmented. The modern American novelist frequently focuses on both the fragmentation of experience and the relativity of values.

In feminist novels, the idea of fragmentation stems from the splitting of the female personality trying to sort itself out into various and limited man-made female roles, a sorting out that usually involves denying or throwing out certain parts of the self. Implicit in the adoption of these roles is the destruction of the personality. Such schizophrenia of female experience is often treated stylistically in fiction by women writers. In Erdrich, this problem is also explored at the narrative

level in that there is no unifying consciousness in Erdrich's three novels. In all three novels there is a multiplicity of voices, perspectives that sometimes contradict each other even when there is a voice of some omniscience. Though such a voice appears in places in The Beet Queen and in Love Medicine, it serves no unifying or organizing function. I will now turn to the aesthetic of fragmentation that serves as a counterpoint to the unity that we typically expect of a novel.

In Love Medicine meaning is not so much dependent on progression as it is on structure. Fragmentation of identities is not reflected in the dividing of characters into separate emblematic characters, but rather in the multiplicity of "I"s. There is no unifying consciousness in Love Medicine. June's story, which is essentially what Love Medicine is, is told by everyone but her. But June's presence is implicit throughout, most vividly in Gordie's chapter in the form of the deer. The multiple points of view nearly correspond with the variety of roles June plays: Gordie (as wife), Lipsha (as mother), Albertine (as aunt), Marie (as daughter), and King, Jr. (as grandmother). Such a pattern, the shifting perspectives, the movement laterally rather than linearly, reflects also the passive and floating quality of women's lives, lives which do not progress, but simply continue. In Love Medicine, the fragmented form of the novel not only reflects the fragmentation of selves, but also, with its lack of forward movement, the lives characterized by passivity and floating. Nector's chapter is punctuated, as I pointed out earlier, with moments of literal paralysis and indecision. Lipsha Morrissey also acknowledges that he had "never really done much with [his] life." This lack of forward movement also reflects the repitition of some characters' lives, such as Gerry's in Love Medicine, who gets himself into a circular pattern of imprisonment and escape.

The multiple point of view also does away with hierarchy and authority; all the characters have an equal voice, and even Erdrich's omniscient voices are on equal footing with the first-person narrations. Each character's point of view stands or falls by the merit of its own teller; it is never undermined by the *author*-ity of an author. It also does away with the specious unities. The supposed unity of the roles held out to women is limiting of the personality and the intellect and creative energies. Unity certainly soothes the strain of confusion and uncertainty, but ultimately it diminishes and destroys. Other feminist novels have noted the dangers of the longing for unity, such as Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook . Lessing states in the introduction to The Golden Notebook that "we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalize" (x). Multiplicity implies the pain of fragmentation, but the necessity of freedom.

* * *

Although the struggle for self-definition is a recurring theme in the works of many women writers, I have found that in Erdrich, it extends beyond feminist issues to include cultural issues. A displacement and massive assault on a group of people affects their understanding of their world and their understanding of themselves within that world. It problematizes their relationship to one another, to their own culture, both essential for the establishment of selfhood. Displacement and marginalization dramatically affect both the individual psyche and the group's psyche and sense of identity. It is no wonder then, as Allen points out, that a recurring theme in Native American novels is transformation and continuance (101). A key component of their cultural identity is persistence like, as Lipsha Morrissey put it, "a globe of frail seeds that's indestructible" (215). The problematic of identity, self-definition and the threat of group death is thus essential in our understanding of Erdrich.

CHAPTER V

'THE SOUND OF MY OWN VOICE CONVINCED ME I WAS ALIVE':MEMORY, STORYTELLING AND THE INFLUENCE OF ORAL TRADITION

In chapter 2 I examined how various characters in Erdrich's novels struggle to carve out an identity in the midst of cultural confusion. Here I will focus on how the act of storytelling is a means of self-creation in Erdrich's fiction. In her three novels, identity is formed in counterpoint to Western forms of narrativity, borrowing from forms of narrativity that are born out of the oral tradition. Essentially, my argument is that two of her novels, Love Medicine and Tracks, are about the dissipation of a culture, embodied in the characters June Kashpaw and Fleur Pillager, both of whom disappear from the landscape. Cultural identity is recovered by the characters in these novels who gather together to tell the story of June and Fleur, and in telling this story, they are telling the story of themselves; in recreating June and Fleur they recreate themselves. My focus will be on the act of storytelling and on the impact of oral tradition in the three novels by Erdrich. My focus here primarily is on the importance of memory and the act of storytelling, but it is impossible to discuss the act of storytelling and gloss over various elements— tales, magic, ritual—which are folkloric in nature. Before I begin a close examination of the act of self-creation through storytelling (primarily in Pauline and Lipsha), I will make a brief exploration of the many folkloric qualities in Erdrich's writing. The only theoretical assumption operating here in regard to folklore is that adhered to by folklorists such as Richard Bauman, Dan Ben-Amos, Alan Dundes, Barre Toelken, and Roger D. Abrahams, among others, who focus more on folklore as performance, event or process rather than genre, structure or text: folklore is not a static thing found in literature, but a dynamic process which interacts with literature. It is an attitude toward folklore that emphasizes the "folk" and the dynamics of folklore (Toelken ix).

The significance of the oral tradition to Native American cultures cannot be overemphasized, and it is enduring. Its influence is felt in Erdrich's work where, especially in Tracks, there is a great deal of emphasis placed on storytelling. Erdrich weaves onto her fiction many elements of folklore such as origin, interposed remarks to the audience (the listener), stories within stories, variations of curing rites, prayers, tales, jokes, personal narratives, and visions. Like the oral

tradition, Erdrich places a great deal of emphasis on event, the sacredness of language, and the inescapability of cultural values.

The incorporation of folkloric elements is an inevitability in novels that are largely about cultural dissolution. Erdrich's novels are about the dissolution of a culture and the need to turn back to find a heroine whose life-story could bring healing and understanding; the novels are about a culture whose beliefs (Pauline) and rituals (Lipsha) have been distorted and perverted. The folkloric elements and rituals that appear in Erdrich are not placed there merely for their quaintness; they are integral in the struggle of the characters and in enriching their understanding of themselves and their worlds as is folklore within a culture.

Her characters' methods of storytelling reveal an aversion to the more Western, Euro-American style of storytelling which is characterized by nuance, introspection and self-indulgence. Her occasional use of third-person limited omniscient underscores the more outwardly- and communally-focused nature of of folklore. Time references tend to be more general than specific (chapters are headed, for example, "Winter 1919"), narrative detail tends to be more impressionistic than precise, and some characters tend to have a more archetypal identity than a personal one.

But influence of the oral tradition is subtle in Erdrich, and does not in any way overwhelm her works. Language, for example, is recognized as sacred in Nanapush's narration, but little attention is paid to language as language; there is virtually no interest in replicating colloquialisms. In Erdrich, folkloric elements are interwoven into the story in an understated way so as not to call attention to them or subordinate the story itself.

Of great significance in Erdrich's fictional universe is the worldview that informs the folklore. Each culture has a specific way of perceiving the world that it transmits to its young, and this worldview is reflected and reproduced in the culture's language, expressions and behavior. A culture continually produces the worldview that has shaped its conception of reality by "creating analogs and parallels on all levels of human expression, from houses to myths" (Toelken 226). Folklore will reflect the codes that a given culture sees as representing the premises of reality. Dundes describes "folk ideas" as units of a worldview which are expressed in a variety of genre, both folkloric genres (games, songs, etc.) and non-folkloric genres (95).

What also seems to be of more significance is the process by which stories gain their folkloric status, a process that Erdrich recreates in her novels. So many of her characters provide their own explanations for various occurences, such as the facial impression in the snow, or the story

about Wristwatch in Love Medicine. Rumors circulate and suspicions take on a life of their own, without concrete evidence, and when rumor is wedded to suspicion we come up with stories about Fleur's sorcery, for example. This is a recreation of what actually happens in folk culture; Erdrich replays for the reader the evolution of folklore.

Perhaps the most visibly folkloric quality in Erdrich's novels is the collaborative nature of narrativity, most keenly felt in Love Medicine where the cast of narrators is large and the narrative shifts are lateral. One of the primary characteristics of folklore is that "its ingredients seem to come directly from dynamic interactions among human beings in communal-traditional performance contexts" (Toelken 28). Folklore is an event that takes place, "usually [with] a group of people, often closely related by occupation or family ties, who have for various reasons developed a particular shared mood" (Toelken 49). Although the project of defining folklore has never been a simple one, theorists like Bauman, Toelken and Ben-Amos emphasize the dynamic and interactive nature (e.g., "dynamic interaction among people in communal-traditional performance contexts" or tradition-based communicative units informally exchanged in dynamic variation through space and time," Toelken 28, 32). One of the striking features of Erdrich's work is that it is indeed dynamic and communal: each narrative informs and shapes other narratives. Although the novels Love Medicine and Tracks are themselves static texts, they consistently makes reference to storytelling as a dynamic process. Tracks conspicuously makes such a reference twice, once in the inscription and once in Pauline's narration ("the story comes up different every time"). We know that the same is true of a performance event such as joketelling. According to Toelken, "no matter how many times the same person tells the same joke, it will almost never be performed exactly the same twice, for a dynamic process (depending on context, mood, intonation, and reason for telling) will be set in motion as that first event is continually reshaped, rephrased, and re-experienced in the mind and actions of the performer" (26). The uniqueness of folklore is in the context - the small group interaction, the performance. Characters gather together to tell their stories, many of them related to June, but some digress from June, e.g., Lulu Lamartine's chapters. And closely tied to the collaborative nature of the storytelling is the focus on community and community's values. The first word of Tracks establishes the communal focus of this storytelling: "We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall" (1). In Erdrich's writing, as in folklore, the focus is on the community, or another individual in the community who might be representative of communal values or lost traditions. For example, in Love Medicine, we have several people who come together to, relate their memories of June

Kashpaw. In Tracks, we have two characters who come together to tell us the story of Fleur Pillager. The most obvious carry over from the oral tradition is the collaborative nature of Erdrich's narratives. The reconstruction of events and people's lives happens only in the interaction of several voices and sometimes in interaction with an audience. Erdrich recreates the dynamic of a community, showing how people (and their narratives) interact with one another to give shape to legends, myths, rumors, and stories. There is a gestalt created in Love Medicine in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Folklore can be identified by its text, texture and context (Dundes 251). The texture is in the vocality of her character's narratives: Erdrich's writing steps off the page with the immediacy of voice and with its compelling resonance; we hear her storytellers, and these storytellers are rich with personality and history. The context can be found in the implied audience, and the characters who are explicitly an audience, e.g., Lulu in Tracks. But the text of the stories themselves, such as the one told by Lipsha about Wristwatch, and the story of the bear in Tracks told by Nanapush, bears the mark of folklore in its very substance. The text of these stories is of a particular kind in which the structure of action and the opening and closing indicate that the events are not to be confused with reality, and the nature of the story has a strong imaginary quality. Her characters' narratives often subordinate fact to an essential truth. It must be remembered that the purposes of lore are many - educational, social, psychological, communal, individual - and equally important (and indeed, if it is to succeed in informing) is the entertaining quality of the lore. Hence characters become bigger than life and the laws of physics shunted. Also integral to the lore's entertaining quality is the narrator's own skill: the storyteller must cloak his or her story in drama and wit, and virtually all of Erdrich's narrators are capable of this, some, such as Nanapush and Lipsha, obviously, more than others. The goal of the storyteller is to make wisdom useful by making it notable and memorable.

And finally, Erdrich's folkloric style tends to be what folklorists would consider female-oriented folklore: it is more collaborative and carried on in a more private, domestic sphere, rather than male-oriented folklore, which tends toward individualism and competition, and the performance context tends to be public (Jordan and Kalcik ix).

The tragedy of life stories moving from the traditional oral mode to the recorded written form is that so much is lost in the way of gesture, cadence and drama. We cannot hear the dramatic impact of a pause, for instance, or see the poignancy of a facial expression. But so much more is lost than mere drama. When ethnographers transcribe an oral history from an Indian, they

decide what elements to weed out. When they come looking for the history of a tribe, they want to hear about the wars and the great hunts, and the lives of Indian women are completely eclipsed by the historians' selectivity. It is not surprising then that the stories in Love Medicine and in Tracks are mostly about women, Fleur Pillager and June Kashpaw, and it is as if Erdrich's task in these two novels is to reinscribe the feminine in Native American "history." But so important is this task of recovering and reinscribing womanhood into Native American history, the characters are compelled to break taboos, i.e., to speak the names of the dead. The popular view of American Indian women propounded by historians, anthropologists and sociologists accords these women an inferior status. The community's collective memory of June Kashpaw and Fleur Pillager, especially Fleur, reveal women whose centrality in the lives of others cannot and does not diminish over time, and whose presence cannot be diminished by mere death or exile. This strongly correlates to the centrality and mutuality in tribal life that Indian women experienced prior to white intrusion. Nearly all of the characters who come together to speak Fleur's and June's names know that they are telling of something larger than just the details of these women's lives. They know that each woman's story contains the story of their people.

Fleur and June both serve symbolic functions: they are the recreations of sustaining mythologies and as such are cultural heroines. An important type of sustaining mythology we find in Native American folklore is the origin myth. One element of folklore that Erdrich has incorporated into her fiction is in a way a derivation of an origin myth. Both Tracks and Love Medicine are about the going back to the origin, back to the mother-creator, Fleur Pillager and June Kashpaw. For Nanapush in Tracks, this storytelling is a ritual by which he will bring Lulu back to Fleur. Nanapush's mission is to bring Lulu to her origins because he knows that Lulu must understand her origins if she is to understand herself. At the beginning of Tracks we know that Lulu refuses to refer to Fleur as mother, resentful we assume because Fleur abandoned her to Nanapush to be raised. But Nanapush knows the vital importance of this story of origin, and insists that Lulu listen.

Pauline's narration of Fleur does not have the same performance context: it is less clear who her audience is. But if Pauline's narration is not folkloric in the contextual sense, then it is at least folkloric in the textual sense and in its texture: Pauline infuses much of her narration of Fleur with the supernatural. Her narration has the texture of something spoken and all the self-consciousness of a dramatic monologue. And her relationship to the subject, Fleur, is much different than that of Nanapush's: to her Fleur represents something that Pauline finds threatening. To

Nanapush, Fleur postively represents a lost past, something powerful and mystical and beautiful that has been lost with the encroachment of white civilization.

Intermixed with her story of Fleur is a bit of the supernatural. Fleur takes on a mythological, archetypal quality in Pauline's narration of her. She begins her story with an intriguing hook: "The first time she drowned in the cold and glassy waters of Matchimanito, Fleur Pillager was only a child" (10). In Nanapush's assessment, Fleur has a definite greatness about her: she's strong, bold and beautiful. But in Pauline's hands she becomes something else, she becomes bigger than life. Pauline stretches the bounds of reality so as to accomodate her insights about people and events. For Pauline, things metonymically present themselves, such as Fleur's teeth. To Pauline, Fleur's strong, sharp and very white teeth reshape Fleur into a wolf. In her configuration of Fleur as a wolf, Pauline adds more information, the embellishment of a crafty storyteller, that Fleur's fifth toes are missing. Pauline's configuration of Fleur alternates between the image of a wolf, the image of a tree, and the image of a witch—between the natural and the supernatural. Pauline's understanding of her universe, a distinctly non-Western mysticism, shapes her perception of Fleur; she contorts facts to fit her configuration. Veracity is not a vital element in Pauline's storytelling. Her mysticism contains a truth of its own, a truth beyond the grip of reality. Fleur, more than just a character, serves an important symbolic function, at least within the universe of the novel, if, as Nanapush says, she was the funnel of their history. Fleur cannot be represented then in the way that narrators typically represent characters; she is too unfathomable. She is that ever elusive part of history, the unnamed and unspoken. To evoke Fleur's strength and ability to endure, Pauline has to step beyond the perimeters of realism.

Pauline is a great storyteller because she has such a vivid imagination: she animates her universe and has a good eye for details, whether they're real or not. And though her storytelling does not have the same kind of urgency that we find in Nanapush's, Pauline clearly has elevated storytelling to an art form. Pauline is a powerful storyteller, and there is certainly a good deal of self-consciousness in her participation in a process of storytelling. She knows that she did not author this story, that she is merely helping to tell it; like other folk storytellers, she is conscious of the tradition which she is part. She makes it clear from the outset that her story is part of a communal act of storytelling, that it is part of a common lore: "It went to show, the people said. It figured to them all right. By saving Fleur Pillager, those two had lost themselves" (10, my italics).

Pauline's narration of Fleur is unconsciously an act of self-creation. In narrating Fleur, Pauline develops her own voice, defining herself by defining Fleur. As Pauline's narrative

progresses, she grows further and further away from Fleur, and it seems that Pauline has to establish herself by underscoring her difference from Fleur. It is necessary for Pauline to distance and devalue Fleur in order to assert herself, and this is captured in the imagery of Pauline boating out into the middle of Matchimanto Lake, distant from Fleur (and the rest), feeling like God, "beyond hindrance or reach" (198). She imagines Fleur "weakened by [her] act" (198). Only in distancing herself from Fleur can Pauline enlarge herself for Fleur's presence is overwhelming and threatening to Pauline's identity.

The stories about Fleur and June are also migration myths and a ritual in the sense that each narrative is about a homecoming: both narratives begin with Fleur and June returning to reservation land. June's homecoming begins with her death in "The World's Greatest Fisherman" chapter of Love Medicine. June had been off the reservation, having left her husband Gordie and their children, finding that motherhood and marriage did not agree with her. Unable to find steady work off the reservation because of her fiesty spirit and her heavy drinking, June apparently started sleeping with white men for money. The opening scene is limited omniscient, moving in and out of June's point of view. The narration is full of Christian imagery and mythology—Easter eggs, Angel Wings, the virgin mother. It is the story of the resurrection, but here it is June's rebirth. She feels that her skin is "hard and brittle, and she knew it was possible, in this condition, to fall apart at the slightest touch" (4). Twice the narrator refers to her body as "pure and naked" (4, 6), and when she falls out of the pickup truck, something happens to her: "It was a shock like being born" (5). June decides to walk an unwalkable distance through the snow storm to the reservation. She dies on the way. And then like Christ walking on water, June walks over the North Dakota snow-laden landscape, her spirit returning home, forcing her way into everyone's memory so that they must tell their story of June. June's homecoming is a ritual process as is Fleur's. As Fleur represented a reclaimed past, acting as a funnel of their history, so June symbolized something not irrevocably in the past, but present in memory, a memory so vital because so inextricably bound up with communal identity. Albertine, the first speaker to recall June, thinks of June as not merely being dead, but "vanished off the land" (7), like her own people. In this chapter, June is present in the scene where King, her son, imagines the car for which his mother had provided money is actually his mother. He jumps on the car and beats it with his fists until his father Gordie subdues him: "It's awful to be dead. Oh my God, she's so cold" (33).

June has the sort of mythological power that Fleur has, a raw strength we have come to associate with Indian women in Erdrich's fictional universe. When her niece Albertine remembers June, what strikes us is not the ordinary details that any niece would remember—June's always carrying an extra stick of gum in her pocket for Albertine—but June's feistiness: "I saw her laughing, so sharp and determined, her purse clutched tight at the bar, her perfect legs crossed" (9). Though June's life had been so bleak, and though she had deteriorated under the pressure of being a Chippewa woman in a white man's world, the memory of June that persists in Albertine's mind is of June laughing, perhaps, and most likely, a defiant laughter. June becomes part of the community's lore, deeply embedded in her family's unconscious and conscious lives. Marie, the woman who had adopted June when June was abandoned at her doorstep, remembers June as not just an ordinary child, but as someone quite different, a little person that held within her a whole history, a whole culture, a whole people, disinherited and dispossessed:

> So I took the girl. I kept her. It wasn't long before I would want to hold her against me tighter than any of the others. She was like me, and she was not like me. Sometimes I thought she was more like Eli. The woods were in June, after all, just like in him, and maybe more. She had sucked on pine sap and grazed grass and nipped buds like a deer. (65)

Marie, in her narration, informs us that June is actually her niece, daughter of her sister Lucille who died out in the bush and left the girl to raise and protect herself. In Marie's configuration, June becomes something else, quasi-historical, a figure out of folklore. Not seeing any feature in the girl's face resembling her parents, Marie imagines June to be a child of the Manitous, the invisible ones who live in the woods. Marie knows that June is different, shy, unable to speak for herself so that Marie feels compelled to speak for her. June's story is the sacred story that must be told: "It was as though I took over and became the voice that wouldn't come from her lips but could be seen, very plain, in the wide upslanted black eyes" (66). Marie conveys June's courage in the rough games she invented with other children, with her lack of fear in the face of punishment, and in her brave acceptance of the fact that her mother had died. Marie tells her audience of the unusual upbringing that June had had, spending time in the woods with her uncle Eli, hunting and snaring.

Much further on into the novel we get to Gordie's chapter, "Crown of Thorns." Gordie is June's husband and cousin and the two grew up together under Marie Kashpaw's roof as brother and sister (a mythic motif in itself). The chapter is set in 1981, a month after June's funeral, and

the story is conveyed not by Gordie, but by a disembodied voice that has access to Gordie's thoughts. Without the first-person narration, this chapter lacks the folkloric quality of some of the earlier chapters, but it retains the mysticism and the supernatural that have become commonplace in this group of personal narratives. In Gordie's drunken hallucinations he imagines that June comes back to him, a ghost. He sees her face in the window, "wild and pale with a bloody mouth" (177). Gordie broke the Indian taboo of speaking the name of the dead when he cried out her name; now June had come back to him. In the Native American worldview, the spirits of the dead live and move among the living. In a universe in which ghosts are very much real and not merely figments of one's imagination, as listeners to this story we have to assume that June is indeed there haunting Gordie, pulling the sheets off their bed and arranging perfume bottles, and for Gordie, at least, this is very real. It is in this folkloric element, the presence and references to ghosts, that we reveal the cultural conceptions that give life and shape to folklore. Ghosts are embodiments of the past, and their prevalence in the landscape indicates the inseparability of past from present. It is very much taken for granted that ghosts animate the universe in many cultures—African, Carribean, Native American, Asian, Euro-American—and hence the folk stories that emerge from these cultures bear the mark of such beliefs.

Gordie runs from the house and gets into the car and in a drunken stupor, tries to drive into town to get more alcohol. Along the way he hits a deer. He stops to get the deer, throws her in the back seat of his car, and drives on into town with the intention of selling her. He is surprised and finds it odd to note that the doe is alone without her fawn, and he quickly searches over the nearby brush only to find no fawn. The night suddenly becomes darker, and as he drives along, Gordie senses the presence of someone behind him. He looks into the rearview mirror and sees June: "Her look was black and endless and melting pure" (180). The doe has the flat black eyes that June had, and looks at him accusingly, sneering that he had made a martyr of himself and that he was unworthy of this excessive self-pity. He takes up a crowbar and brings it down between her eyes, finally killing the doe, or in his mind, killing June. He looks in the backseat and sees June sprawled out, her short skirt hiked up over her hips, her black hair in a swirl over her face. We have no reason to doubt the truth of Gordie's perception, that indeed, this is the spirit of June, ever-present in the lives of those who had survived her. As the narrator says in the opening pages of Love Medicine, June Kashpaw had indeed come home.

Some of Erdrich's characters are more conscious of their roles as preserver and transmitter of their culture than others. Nanapush and Lipsha are active tradition bearers, i.e., individuals who

can shape and tell the community's stories. They pass on stories to their children or their children's children, as in Nanapush's case, using the word to advance those concepts crucial to cultural survival. Obviously, Nanapush is more aware of the vital importance of this act than Pauline, and Lipsha perhaps moreso than Nector. Lipsha is a skilled storyteller, deeply tied to the stories of his people, recounting events with humour and grace, betraying to the audience a good deal of wisdom. With Nanapush, there is a stronger sense of urgency and a stronger sense of a present audience, and his speech is a bit more formal while Lipsha tends toward the colloquial. But Lipsha is keenly aware of telling his story under the pressure of cultural annihilation: he speaks of the diminished spirituality of his people.

> Our Gods aren't perfect...but at least they come around
> ...if you ask them right...but to ask proper was an art
> that was lost to the Chippewas once the Catholics gained
> ground...(195)

And though Lipsha's story is ostensibly about the strength and endurance of his grandparents and the indistinguishable power of love, there is an underlying anger and resentment at being witness to cultural genocide:

> How else could I explain what all I had seen in my short
> life—King smashing his fist in things, Gordie drinking
> himself down to the Bismarck hospitals, or Aunt June
> left by a white man to wander off in the snow. How else
> to explain the times my touch don't work, and farther
> back, to the old-time Indians who was swept away in the
> outright germ warfare and dirty-dog killing of the whites.
> In those times, us Indians was so much kindlier than now.
> (195)

The story of his family's demise is the story of his culture's breakdown: they run parallel of each other like two streams. Though Lipsha's story is about many things, it is essentially a story of a curing rite, adapted to a new landscape and onto a different cultural configuration. It is about a curing rite that goes awry, perhaps from faith run dry, perhaps because Lipsha, like others of his generation, has lost contact with cultural practices, and is left with only vestigial cultural forms, the content of which has been confused with Western ideas and beliefs. But the curing rite is not merely the imposition of ritual upon the novel. It is a dynamic event that reveals Lipsha's attitude toward his grandparents, his community, the demise of his culture—all of which are central textually speaking. Lipsha is a healer, or what would have been described as a shaman. Selec-

tion of a shaman was based on ability and signs of devotion, wisdom and honesty. Clearly, from the details of his narrative, we are able to glean that Lipsha is devoted to his grandparents, Margaret and Nector, wise despite his youth, and honest. He performs in "Love Medicine" a replaying of a curing rite in modern dress. Lipsha assumes the role of the healer: "I know the tricks of mind and body inside out without ever having trained for it, because I got the touch...I got secrets in my hands that nobody ever knew to ask...the medicine flows out of me" (189,190). The curing rite is done at the behest of his grandmother. Marie Kashpaw, who has been married to Nector Kashpaw, raised his children, and supported his local political career, is troubled to find that in his old age, his libido is getting out of control. Grandpa Kashpaw had been drawn back to Lulu Lamartine, and Marie, still in love with him, can not and will not tolerate his fooling around. She asks Lipsha to put the touch on him, to bring his affections back to her. Lipsha recounts the events of the rite, but interwoven with the reportage are his meditations on life and the love: "You see I thought love got easier over the years so it didn't hurt so bad when it hurt, or feel so good when it felt good. I thought it smoothed out and old people hardly noticed it. I thought it curled up and died, I guess. Now I saw it rear up like a whip and lash" (192).

Lipsha clearly relishes the opportunity to tell his story. His storytelling style has a feminine chattiness about it, full of asides and digressions. When we get down into the crux of the curing rite, we find that Marie is largely responsible for orchestrating the ritual. And there is a good deal of irony in this because Marie is one of Erdrich's characters who distances herself from Indian culture. As Lipsha notes, Marie will not admit that she has a scrap of Indian blood in her. But Marie has a shamanic way of relating to her environment that she can't seem to disown, that is, the unity of spiritual and material life that is distinctly non-Western. Marie, according to Lipsha's story, acknowledges an animistic universe in which inanimate things are endowed with spirit and communicate with her. Lipsha notes that, "she is constantly being told things by her...household appliances. One time she told Gordie never to ride with a crazy Lamartine boy. She had seen something in the polished-up tin of her bread toaster" (198). And, more importantly, Marie has a strong memory, and as Lipsha is astute in noting, memory for Marie is a powerful tool: "Some-place in the blood Grandma knows things. She also remembers things, I found. She keeps things filed away. She's got a memory like them video games that don't forget your score. One reason she remembers so many details about the trouble I gave her in early life is so she can flash back total when she needs to" (199). But it is Marie who remembers the love medicine. The love medicines are something of an old Chippewa specialty, Lipsha notes, something that no

other tribe had gotten down so well. Lipsha begins preparing for the curing rite by remembering: "I put my whole mentality to it, nothing held back. After a while I started to remember things I'd heard gossiped over" (199). He remembers stories of different love charms that people have used. He remembers the "powerfullest" of them all, the one that we recall Pauline had used on Sophie in Tracks , which involved nail clippings and little body parts. Instead of trying a tested recipe, Lipsha comes up with one of his own, replicating the process of invented tradition—goose heart. Geese, after all, mate for life, and if Nector ate one heart and Marie the other, well, wouldn't that work? While Lipsha is engaged in hunting down geese, he recalls for us, with the artfullness of a gifted storyteller, more lore relating to his people.

It is in the chapters like Lipsha's that Erdrich's writing attains a strong folkloric quality. In a sense, all three of her novels have the feel of folklore in the collective nature of the composition of stories and the implied audience in each narrative. Also there is an orality and vocality in all of her narratives, a distinguishing feature of folklore, though not necessarily essential for identifying folklore. Erdrich's inscription, "the story comes up different every time," provides one of the defining features of folklore: the forms and texts are performed repeatedly by different peoples on various occasions. Lipsha's chapters contain another element of folklore: his narrations contain asides that are part of a public possession, a story shared by the community such as this one about Lulu:

> There was this one time that Lulu Lamartine's little blue tweety bird...flown up inside her dress and got lost within there. I recalled her running out into the hallway trying to yell something shaking. She was doing a right good jig there, cutting the rug for sure, and the thing is it never flown out. To this day *people speculate* where it went. They fear she might perhaps of crushed it in her corsets. It sure hasn't ever yet been seen alive.
>
> (201, my italics)

In this passage we can see some of the features of oral storytelling: the formulaic opening and the formulaic closing, and the expression used to describe dancing. These features are metanarrational in that they draw attention to the act of storytelling. The story about Wristwatch is clearly another piece of public currency that Lipsha relates. The story is reminiscent of the kind of folklore we encounter in a Toni Morrison novel where characters are identified and named by a significant or characteristic act. Naming then becomes communal and collaborative along with the act of storytelling. Wristwatch, Lulu's cousin, got his name by wearing his dead father's

broken wristwatch, refusing ever to take it off, even after being teased about it:

> He often put it to his ear like he was listening to
> the tick. But it was broken for good and forever,
> *people said so*, at least that's what they thought.
> (200, my italics)

The collective, gossipy nature of the story, indicates that it is part of the public currency. The italics highlight another formulaic phrase which identifies the storytelling tradition. As Lipsha goes on, he uncovers another feature that is characteristic of folklore, that it is a story that exists often in variation, comes up different every time, depending on the storyteller:

> Well I saw Wristwatch smoking in his pickup one
> afternoon and by nine that evening he was dead.
> *He died sitting at the Lamartine's table, too. As*
> *she told it...*(201, my italics)

The facts of the story vary and both or all versions are accepted. A piece of folklore will exist in many forms. But we see here the abandonment of the constraints of reality and logic in "he died this way too." For it is the meaning of the story that matters here. As I mentioned earlier, one of the characteristics of folklore is the subordination of fact to an essential truth. Lipsha goes on:

> But here's the strange thing: when the Senior
> Citizen's orderly took the pulse he noticed that
> the wristwatch Wristwatch wore was now working.
> The moment he died the wristwatch started keeping
> perfect time. They buried him with the watch still
> ticking on his arm. (210, 211)

(This is a reversal of a traditional motif: "The clock stopped, never to run again, when the old man died.") Naming, as we know from Pauline's narrative as discussed in chapter 2, is an act of empowerment. Nicknaming and namecalling also help strengthen various community members' self-definition, an activity we also see in African-American communities as well. In assigning a nickname, a community helps to give a community-generated identity that is separate and distinct from the identity assigned them by the dominant culture, an identity that is usually two-dimensional. This community-generated identity fleshes out the character and serves the function of bestowing importance and recognition on an individual who might not find it in the dominant culture.

In a later chapter, "Crossing the Water," Lipsha relates more community lore, again about Lulu

Lamartine, who Lipsha describes as the "jabwa witch whose foundation garments was a nightmare cage for little birds" (240). The folklore about Lulu stems from rumours about her supernatural powers of observation and insight:

> *That time* the Defender girl was less than two months pregnant
> Lulu knew it just from touching her hand.
> When Old Man Bunachi got a mistaken thousand-dollar credit
> from the government in his social security check, she asked him for
> a tiding-over loan. He had been keeping it a secret.
> What about Germaine? She told Germaine to quit hoarding commodity
> flour and give it away because there was worms in it? How do *you* figure?
> (241, my italics)

Again, we see how Erdrich incorporates metanarrational devices, the "that time," a formulaic opening which serves to separate the storytelling event (the present) from the narrated event (the past). These performance keys, "you" and "that time" suggest a listener, an audience and a performance context. Lipsha relays this to an apparently familiar audience, not pausing to explain who some of these characters are; knowledge of these people and incidents are assumed in the listener.

Lipsha finally gets back to the curing rite. Two other characteristics of folklore that we recognize in Erdrich's fiction are the use of digression and of stories embedded in stories. Lipsha loves to talk, and in his narration one story spills into another story, and he has moments where he abandons the story altogether to wax philosophical. When he returns from his digression, we see that the curing rite begins to go awry when Lipsha goes out hunting for geese, and clearly lacking the necessary hunting skills, comes back empty-handed. Lipsha begins to doubt the power of the ritual and in a crisis of faith, goes down to the general store and takes what he describes as an evil shortcut—buys frozen turkey hearts. Lipsha begins ruminating on the question of faith. He stops believing in the importance of the ritual. "I told myself love medicine was simple. I told myself the old superstitions was just that—strange beliefs" (203). He tries to convince himself that the elements of ritual are not really significant, and puts all the significance on the faith which underlies practice. His dismissal of ritual is deadly though, as we later see. "I finally convinced myself that the real actual power to the love medicine was not the goose heart itself but the faith in the cure" (203). The curing rite, part of the shamanic tradition, incorporates and integrates form and content, ritual with belief. It is Lipsha's separation of the two, an ostensibly easier way to go but more costly as it turns out.

Lipsha then attempts to graft this tradition onto a new cultural configuration, and in his confu-

sion, takes the turkey hearts to a priest for the priest's blessing. Lipsha fails to get the blessing for this ritual from the priest, but as he walks out of the church, he sticks his fingers down into the holy water, and blesses the hearts himself. Lipsha seems unaware of the irony of his mixing of religious practices, so divergent in their worldviews but so close in their mysticism. What Lipsha does become aware of is that things have changed irrevocably, and the curing rite, once an integral part of his cultural history, has become farcical. The turkey hearts bought from the local grocer do not cure his grandparents' love. Grandpa Kashpaw chokes on the heart and dies. Lipsha's narrative is about a piece of his culture that is lost, but it is also about something that prevails over and above cultural genocide: the power of love, and the strength and enduring power of a people worn down and endlessly tested. He embraces the irony of their lives, irresolvably weak and strong at the same time, "a globe of frail seeds that's indestructible" (215). The significance of the story about Wristwatch now comes clear: it is about irony, but it is also about deep and unshakable faith, about Wristwatch's steadfast commitment to wearing that watch despite the ridicule it might have brought.

Whereas Nanapush's story is told directly to Lulu so that Lulu may know the story of her mother and be empowered by it, Lipsha has no such direct audience and clear mission. His audience appears to be non-Indian ("now there's your God in the Old Testament and there is Chippewa Gods as well") , replicating the many oral histories told by Indian men and women to white ethnographers. At the end of the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth century there was a rising interest in native customs and an increased interest in salvaging the remains of Native American culture, which prompted historians to begin recording life stories in hopes that a single life would illuminate a culture.[1] What is confusing about Lipsha's narration is that it on one hand seems folkloric because the implied audience seems to be local, conversant with the list of names he throws out. But then we are uncertain when he says "there is your God in the Old Testament," implying that his audience may be unfamiliar and not local. Richard Bauman writes of the social matrix of folklore as being the primary interest for folklorists. Folklore, he asserts quite generally, is a function of shared identity. But then he poses the problem of groups having what he describes as differential identities and their transmission of stories beyond group boundaries. He uses the example of two tribes in Northwestern Canada, who have different cultures and different languages, who meet regularly and exchange stories. This is the performance of folklore despite the absence of a common social matrix. The point Bauman makes in his article is that folklore performance does not require that the lore be a collective representation of the

participants: "folklore may be differentially distributed, differentially performed, differentially perceived, and differentially understood" (38).

One of the first things we notice in Nanapush's narrative is the distinctly Indian way of referring to relatives which stand in contrast to Western labels and categories. Those who attended communal stories would know that the terms granddaughter and daughter could be used interchangeably. The term grandmother, for instance, could be used to refer to several women, in fact, any older woman or a medicine woman would be referred to as grandmother. The label connotes wisdom, revealing respect rather than defining a relationship. Nanapush refers to Fleur as his niece at one point, and then at another point tells her that she is his daughter. But here, this manner of addressing Fleur, characteristic in communal storytelling, is a way of making clear his attachment and affection for her and a way of revealing some degree of intimacy. Nanapush had been the one to find Fleur and save her life when she had lost her whole family. Nanapush refers to Lulu as daughter sometimes, granddaughter at other times. But we have no reason to believe that he is related to Fleur at all. In fact, Nanapush says that Fleur is the last of the Pillagers, so we have pretty strong evidence that there is no biological tie between Nanapush and Fleur. Also, later in his narrative, Nanapush refers to Eli Kashpaw as "son." We know for certain that both Eli and Nector Kashpaw are Margaret's sons from a previous marriage. The word "son" is used by Nanapush to signify an intimacy that had developed on the heels of a shared event rather than to signify an actual relationship. Nanapush, we know from the beginning of Tracks, lost his entire family to tuberculosis.

Another feature of folklore we find in Erdrich's writing is the insistence on the sacredness of language, something that seems to be characteristically Native American, for we find the same concern in Silko's Ceremony. In Tracks moreso than the other novels, emphasis is made on the sacredness of language, especially in Nanapush's narration, but also, and this is true in both Nanapush's and Pauline's narrative, language is used as a means of asserting one's identity, both individually and nationally. For Nanapush, retaining the old language is vital for preserving his Indian identity; for Pauline, abandoning her old language and insisting on speaking only English is her means of asserting her individuality and separateness from her family, an act so necessary, at least in her mind, for her survival. In telling her story (and by implication, telling it in English) Pauline names herself.

Another element of Native American traditional storytelling that Erdrich makes manifest use of is the Native American conceptions of time. It is important to recognize that the Native American

understanding of time is radically different than the Western. Barre Toelken writes of his experience among the Navajo Indians in the context of doing folkloric research. Toelken feels that it is incumbent upon the folklorist to compare the measurements used by one's own culture with those used by others. When he tried to explain that his watch was an instrument used to measure time, he ran into some problems. The Navajos have no word for time in their language. When he tried to explain that this instrument on his wrist told him when to eat, when to work, i.e., it structured his life for him, he was only met with confusion. He could only explain the mechanics of the watch. When he tried to convey that the instrument was a reference point to some larger, ongoing process, he realized that there was a conceptual barrier, i.e., in the Indian worldview, there is no larger, ongoing process separate from our lives. Toelken finally concedes, that indeed, it's nothing, "it's all inside the watch" (277-278).

In traditional Western novels we have plots that stick to linear temporal progression. But in Erdrich's writing we have the abandonment of neat, sequential development. In Love Medicine we find the most difficulty locating a logical sequence. In the oral tradition the oral presentation tends to abandon the illusion of sequence because the presentation tends to be associative. Thus the reader of Love Medicine, like a listener at an oral presentation, bears the responsibility of structuring the narrative material into a logical sequence. It is the job of the reader to assemble this fragmented experience; meaning emerges with the perception of pattern. And Nanapush makes repeated allusions to the dynamic of story, structure and meaning. Although the chapters are headed with a date, the reader only knows that she is moving forward in time by going back to the beginning of the chapter to check the date. The movement forward in time and the linearty of the story are barely perceptible. This can partially be attributed to the fact that there is lateral shifting of perspectives and the fact that the characters' lives are not as tightly interwoven as they are in The Beet Queen. In The Beet Queen there is a stronger sense of linear development because there is a much smaller cast of characters. Events bear a discernible relationship to one another and pile on top of one another in small, even increments. But in Love Medicine we begin with June's death and her family's reaction in 1981, then we drop back to 1934 to June's adoptive mother, Marie. June's presence pervades the rest of the narrative, which loops around and comes up again to 1981 and beyond to 1984. It is significant that she structured the novel this way because it has the effect of intertwining the past and the present, because in this story the past pervades the present. June is not a character that merely belonged to the past; she is very much a part of the present, her spirit living among her family, affecting them daily. Sometimes

the jumps in time are large and the individual chapters hard to place in relation to June, so the reader is left to do a good deal of construction, becoming a collaborator herself in this storytelling event. The collaborative effort of recalling June is essential in transforming a story that is superficially negative (a government account, another drunken Chippewa woman who dies a violent death) into a story that is positive and empowering. The same could be said of Fleur's story. Superficially, Fleur's story is simply another Indian disappearing from the landscape. But the collaborative reconstruction of Fleur makes Fleur's story into one of enrichment and empowerment.

Storytelling as a theme often surfaces in the writings of members of cultures in which the oral tradition was the cultural linchpin upon which one's sense of history and identity turn. We find the same concern in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God in which attention is drawn to the act of storytelling. Janie, early in the story, enters the narrative to take over, more or less, and tells her own story to Phoeby, to whom she has expressed a need for an audience. But the text never releases its proprietary consciousness, and eventually the disembodied narrative voice resumes control over the storytelling. In Chapter 20, Hurston uses broad white spaces and ellipses to indicate that Janie's storytelling to Phoeby is over and serves to remind us that we were eavesdropping. There has been a good deal of debate over whether Janie is represented as a character who grows and becomes empowered over the course of the narrative. But Henry Louis Gates Jr. points out that the significance of this narrative technique is not in its revelation of Janie's development so much as it imitates "the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical structures of actual speech so as to give the illusion of oral narration" (196).

In Tracks, Erdrich has created a novel that is a storytelling event, with an audience in place, not just implied, in the Nanapush sections. But the glaring theme throughout the novel, both in Pauline's narration and Nanapush's, is that narrative has powerful transformative potential. Once the performance context is established, when Nanapush addresses the granddaughter directly on the first page of the novel, he introduces the theme of storytelling by conspicuously drawing attention to his role as active tradition bearer: "Granddaughter, you are the child of the invisible, the ones who disappeared when, along with the first bitter punishments of early winter, a new sickness swept down" (2). The beginning of Tracks has all the excitement of public performance: there is the dramatic impact of profound change in rhythm created by single sentences broken out and isolated into a paragraph: "My girl, I saw the passing of times you will never know" (2). As a principle player in this act of storytelling, Nanapush takes on the responsibility of making

visible the invisible and bringing back those who have disappeared. He must give shape and meaning to the chaos of their experience and bring it into a usable perspective for his audience. The Nanapush sections of the story are more like a dramatic monologue, and in that sense, the influence of the oral tradition is most strongly felt; the presence of a listener is clear and unambiguous:

> But the earth is limitless and so is luck and so were our people once. Granddaughter, you are the child of the invisible, the ones who disappeared...(1)
> ...and now I ask for your indulgence for I can only repeat what I remember, even to a granddaughter (105)
> This is where you come in, my girl, so listen. (57)

Nanapush's narrative is also resonant of an oral tradition stylistically, tonally, and syntactically. Lulu, though silent through the novel, serves an important function as the implied future bearer of the tale. Having come back from the government school, presumably educated and articulate, she is in a position to bring the tale of her mother back to her community. Although Fleur was able to live a deviant and independent life, she was unable to give the story of her life to her daughter so that her daughter may use it as a template for her own.

In Erdrich's fictional universe everybody is telling a story throughout each novel. It is ongoing storytelling, from one teller to the next, some more gifted and eloquent than others, but everyone has a shot at telling his or her story. Erdrich makes limited use of the third person omniscient, a feature occasionally found in folk narrating, e.g., in Native American myths there is often omniscience or shifting points of view. But only in various chapters of The Beet Queen and Love Medicine does Erdrich make use of omniscience. But the relationship that the omniscient sections bear to the first person sections are not hierarchical. Each must tell his/her own story, and the reader is on her own to discern the relative truths and link together a whole and complete narrative. But like Hurston's Janie, Erdrich's Nanapush must tell his story; there is a similar sense of urgency. For both Hurston and Erdrich, storytelling becomes thematized and this theme is a corollary to concerns centering on identity. That Erdrich should thematize the act of storytelling is no surprise: this tradition is a major force in Indian resistance.

The need for memory is as important as the need for storytelling. It typically emerges in response to crisis: with cultures such as the Native American culture(s), as with individuals, identity and memory become problematic when continuity with the past is threatened. Erdrich, like most writers from marginalized cultures, has an intense interest in the past, how the past and

the present intertwine and inform each other. But it should be clarified that memory is not to be confused with the idea of nostalgia. For Erdrich, storytelling and memory are not in the service of nostalgia, which is a reactionary attachment to the past, to the good old days when men were men and women were women. For Erdrich and Hurston, storytelling and memory have to do with survival. Tradition depends on memory, thus traditional storytelling depends on memory. And memory, like storytelling, has a collaborative dimension. Nanapush acknowledges that other people's memories are important and necessary for your own memory, that indeed, one memory can stimulate another memory, fill up the voids in another memory, and so on. When he saves Fleur from tuberculosis and she regains her capacity for speech, she begins to remember her family, helping Nanapush to remember: "With her memory, mine came back, only too sharp" (5). Memory may look back in order to move forward and transform disabling fictions to enabling fictions, altering our relation to the present and future. Nanapush's story is an enabling fiction. He conveys to Lulu the fighting spirit of her mother, a woman who was not a victim, who left the reservation, but only after taking revenge on the white men who forced her out. Lulu needs to remember Fleur's story because forgetting would put her in the same place as Pauline. Women especially need to remember because forgetting is a major obstacle to change. Speaking of the young and pre-verbal Fleur Pillager, Nanapush says that, "she was too young and had no stories or depth of life to rely upon" (7). And later he recognizes the redeeming value of stories: "During the year of sickness, when I was the last one left, I saved myself by starting a story...I got well by talking. Death could not get a word in edgewise, grew discouraged, and traveled on" (46). But memory is tricky and though it can be liberating, it can be duplicitous, as Pauline recognizes:

> It was Russell, I am sure, who first put his arms on the bar,
> thick iron that was made to slide along the wall and fall across
> the hasp and lock. He strained and shoved, too slight to move it
> into place, but he did not look to me for help. Sometimes, thinking
> back, I see my arms lift, my hands grasp, see myself dropping the
> beam into the metal grip. At other times, that moment is erased.
> (27)

In the tradition of other contemporary women writers such as Morrison, and particularly Margaret Atwood, Erdrich uses memory and the past as a means of self-discovery. Erdrich's view of the past is not of a solidified place, but rather a fluid landscape, i.e., a malleable, open and fluctuating place. The past is neither fixed nor finished, but vital, and vitally connected to the present. The present is a looking-glass through which we view the past, and is capable of investing the past with new meaning depending what our current needs and questions may be.

As Maxine Hong Kingston suggests, "the reason we remember the past moment at all is that our present-day life is still a working out of a similar situation"; "understanding the past changes the present. And the ever-revolving present changes the significance of the past" (Rabinowitz 177).

Nanapush knows the urgency of telling one's own story, knows that it has to do with one's self-awareness, and there is strength in self-knowledge, self-definition. Giving voice to one's experience has to do with survival, as so many women writers know. For somewhere in the act of storytelling the structures of memory that will contain the gist of the story for the rest of our lives are developed. Erdrich underscores the notion of the centrality of memory to story performance: telling is remembering.

In Adrienne Rich's "Diving Into the Wreck" the narrator, the universal I, but this time not the universal masculine "I" that had served to represent all our experience, but a new I, the androgyne, the "mermaid whose dark hair streams black/ the merman in his armored body," (1230) takes a deeply personal voyage into the past. The purpose for this exploration is to go beyond the stories, the histories, the interpretations that are limited, to the thing itself: "the wreck and not the story of the wreck. The thing itself and not the myth." The sense of self, the personal and cultural history is transgressed in the writing of the myth, in the retelling of the story by those in power. That is where one is murdered, erased, stricken from the "book of myths in which our names do not appear." Here too, as in Tracks, the search backward has a sense of urgency, a sense of necessity, the recalling of something that is vital, the reappropiation from history books: "My girl, listen well. Nanapush is a name that loses power every time that it is written and stored in a government file" (32). In Rich's "The Middle-aged" the theme of returning, the pull of memory, the distortion of the past, the need for re-visioning and re-remembering, and the dynamic of the interplay between past and present are explored. It is the omissions in one's personal history (as equally problematic in cultural history) that are explored. One must find and unearth the horror underlying the safety and security of a placid middle-class existence. There is a necessity for teasing out the story underneath the Story: "They were so kind/ Would have given us anything; the bowl of fruit/ Was filled for us..." (15-17). But the project is to move beyond the myth to the artifacts themselves, "the coarse stain", "the crack in the study window", the "letters locked in a drawer" in order to find the alternative story, the story they did not speak:

> All to be understood by us, returning
> Late, in our own time — how that peace was made,
> Upon what terms, with how much left unsaid. (24-26)

Similarly, in Toni Morrison's Beloved, Sethe, must confront her past so that she may know the consequences of choice. It is interesting to note that Sethe is spelled quite similarly to Lethe, which in Greek mythology was the river of forgetfulness in Hades. To Sethe the future was a matter of keeping the past safely at a distance. But it is forgetfulness that confines her in the present. Sethe must confront her past, made incarnate in Beloved. Beloved's resurrection forces Sethe and the others involved to return to and reinterpret the past. Only in looking back do they begin to understand themselves and to reconsider where they have been. They realize the ironically named Sweet Home to be an actual hell. Whatever kindness that the Garner's may have displayed, they still condoned and perpetuated the evil of slavery. It is not until many years later that Paul D realizes that "It wasn't sweet and it sure wasn't home" (14-15).

Memory and storytelling is a central theme in Tracks, which is told from two points of view, from different generations: that of Pauline Kashpaw, representing a dilemma of the younger generation of Native Americans, a character whose sense of identity is split between ancient Chippewa beliefs and Christianity. For Pauline, as for Sethe, memory is threatening and the past must be kept at bay. The story is told in tandem with Nanapush, the voice of the last remaining, the voice of the past, for whom memory is the key to survival. Nanapush is an artful storyteller, memory sharp and vital, who presents his story with respect and reverence for the past, knowing that the past is inextricably tied up with the present. The novel begins with him and ends with him. Pauline, suspended between the two worlds, Christianity and Shamanism, moves away from Shamanism toward Christianity, and with each step of the way, loses a little more of her memory. Her narrative ends bitterly and finally with the dissolution of her identity and a severance from the past. She parts from the narrative with her own identity already dissolved and the prophecy that her people are on the verge of complete dissolution. Pauline's story is tragic in the sense that it reveals that a culture, embodied in a character like Fleur, cannot survive in a dominant culture that denies it unimpeachable homeland rights. But it is also explores how a culture, embodied in a character like Pauline, is waylaid by adopted beliefs inimical to one's way of life and waylaid by a faulty and weak memory. But we know something of the culture could be saved if Pauline recognized, like Nanapush, that there is strength in memory, in communal cohesion, so often embodied in folk traditions. Many of Erdrich's characters tell their own story and implicity recognize the importance of memory, but in Tracks, it is with Nanapush, the leader of a tribe, that the need for a strong and vivid memory is most clearly trumpeted. It is only in Nanapush's memory that Lulu can find her mother. In thematizing the act of storytelling and the importance of

memory, as does Silko, Erdrich reveals to her readers the enabling and empowering nature of fiction. Although Pauline may not consciously recognize the vital necessity of memory, her memory of various events haunt her nevertheless. The memory of the death of the three men in Argus plays tricks with her throughout her narrative, and Pauline attempts to come to terms with it because she must. Pauline's memory of this event is important for her understanding of her role in the deaths of three men, her complicity, her guilt, her innocence and how it relates to the present and how, because it is open to change, because it is in flux, it interacts and informs the present, and how, depending on what she omits, the present alters the past.

Nanapush speaks of things that his audience would be familiar with, that his audience would take for granted. His audience, Lulu, would know, for instance, that ghosts existed, and when he speaks of the ghosts that inhabit the woods at Matchimanito Lake, he need not apologize or explain this away as a cultural peculiarity. Nor when any of the other narrators in either Love Medicine or Tracks speak of drowning as being the worst kind of death for a Chippewa need they explain, for it is assumed that the audience is familiar with these beliefs. The novels are about, in a sense, cultural beliefs; indeed, belief is central to both novels. It is of paramount importance to Pauline in Tracks, for it is necessary in her aspirations towards Christianity and necessary, whether she's cognizant of it or not, in her configuration of the world filled with magical powers and monsters at the bottom of lakes. But Pauline is doomed whatever she does: in her excessive devotion to Christianity she is considered crazy by those in the community, but in the tale she tells of Fleur, she reveals also the impossibility of an alternative path. She either assimilates or she is driven off the landscape, no trace of her left behind. Pauline finds a safe place in fantasy, the real world offering her no room. Magic is the only hope of transforming the sordid reality of Pauline's existence.

* * *

Erdrich's three novels are open-ended structures; the voices of the novels travel out of the landscape of the novel and occasionally into the landscape of folklore to enrich and enliven their stories. By borrowing from the oral tradition, Erdrich is able to break the bonds of the naturalistic— going into the mystical, metaphysical and the supernatural. Her novels' voices are liberated voices, and their quest is to become audible in American culture. Not only are these voices struggling for recognition, but searching for themselves and for the other (June Kashpaw and

Fleur Pillager). Like the protagonist in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, they struggle for recognition and self-definition and become visible by telling their own stories.

One of the defining features of Erdrich's fiction is its disregard for boundaries, and in her incorporation of folkloric form into artistic forms, she again dismisses the arbitrariness of boundaries. The examination of the folkloric in Erdrich's writing reveals the confluence of form and content on issues such as language, art, reality, and morality. These issues, recurring in my reading of Erdrich, are inseparable from other major issues that I have examined in other chapters—the struggle for self-definition, metafiction, and gender roles to name a few. Here I have illustrated how Erdrich has drawn upon the Native American oral tradition to lend power to her storytelling. Her use of folkloric forms has given her fiction its distinctive power and its colloquial grace. Louise Erdrich is part of a continuing tradition of American writers—Zora Neale Hurston, Eudora Welty, Maxine Hong Kingston, to name a few—who have found the oral tradition to be a deep well from which they can draw for style and content. The adaptation of oral modes of discourse onto Western literary forms gives Erdrich's work its distinctive Americanness.

NOTES

[1] Bataille, Gretchen and Kathleen Mullen Sands. American Indian Women: Telling Their Lives. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1984. Sands and Bataille's work was quite illuminating and one of the few works devoted to this largely neglected area.

CHAPTER VI

THE SUBVERSION OF NARRATIVE: LOUISE ERDRICH'S USE OF MAGICAL REALISM AND THE MINORITY WOMAN WRITER'S AESTHETIC

In previous chapters I have focused on how Erdrich's artistic expression is shaped by cultural factors, i.e., how the Native American influence shapes her ideas on gender and gender relations, how the oral tradition resonates in her writing. But in this chapter I would like to examine how some of the subversive techniques that she employs place her into an emerging tradition of minority women writers such as Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston and Leslie Silko, whose writing can be characterized by the use of magic and ghosts. The incorporation of magic into narrative is subversive because it defies some of the conservative tendencies of realism. Thus far I have not discussed the use of magic and its implications, and this is a glaring oversight considering how pervasive the use of magic realism is in Erdrich's work. If there is anything that I have accomplished in this dissertation, I hope I have at least made clear and urgent the need of feminist literary criticism to include in its umbrella of criticisms one that theorizes on the experience of women from marginalized cultures and how their experience as marginalized women (a double alienation) affects and shapes their artistic expression.

It seems that Erdrich's fictional landscape is in one way an arena for her to work out her own struggles as a woman who is part-Chippewa, part German-American. In "Naming, Magic and Documentary: The Subversion of the Narrative in Song of Solomon, Ceremony and China Men," Paula Rabinowitz looks at the works of Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston and Leslie Silko to try to locate a common thread and finds it in their status as minority women writers.[1] The awareness of racial difference alters the self-configuration among the Native Americans and mixed breeds in Erdrich's stories, creating a permanent sense of otherness. That was true for the men and women alike, the Nector Kashpaws and the Pauline Puyats. But surely there is a radical otherness that Native American women, Asian-American women and African-American women must experience that is so fundamentally different than the otherness that white women experience, forging a radically different self-configuration, one which requires a radically different means of expression. If this is so, then I agree with Rabinowitz who claims that a radically

different theory needs to be generated to uncodify this expression; the maps we bring to read Jane Austen cannot be grafted onto a reading of Toni Morrison or Loiuse Erdrich. Minority women writers are significant contributors to American literature and we need to find an appropriate discourse to enrichen our understanding of their challenges and their contributions. Feminist criticism needs to develop a discourse that not only accounts for sexual difference, but also for cultural difference.

When I speak of "challenges" to which we need to broaden our understanding, I am speaking of those formidable struggles which minority women writers like Erdrich encounter in developing a voice, a unified artistic vision within and against the context of the Western literary tradition (the canon), her status as a cultural outsider, and her status as a woman. As I pointed out in chapter 4, part of this entails a melding together of Western literary practice with narrative conventions particular to Native American culture. Erdrich has incorporated myth, legend and other elements of the oral tradition into a quasi-historical account of lands being stripped from her people. She has played with narrative as I have pointed out in chapter 1 through a use of metafictional textual practice; she has played with language through relentless punning and subverting of stereotypes, as I pointed out in chapter 3. And despite all her subversive narrative strategies, Erdrich has remained accessible to a broad audience. For like Morrison and Kingston, Erdrich produces highly readable and accessible novels while rejecting the tenets of realist fiction on the one hand, and the obscure practices of post-modernist, avant-garde writers on the other. In recognizing the politics of history and the necessity of magic to mediate events, the writing of minority women writers is closer to that tradition of Latin American writers represented by Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Isabel Allende than the tradition of Anglo-American women writers represented by writers like Joyce Carol Oates or Susan Minot. However, I would not suggest a South American influence here: magic is indigenous to Morrison's, Erdrich's and Kingston's cultures and they integrate magic on its own terms in a way that suits their own artistic agendas. Latin American narrative is shaped by the confluence of African, Tribal and Hispanic cultures under colonialism. The writings of Kingston, Morrison and Erdrich are shaped by the confluence of American popular culture, the rich tradition of Western literature, the traditions of their own cultures, and consciousness of gender ideology. The ghosts of June Kashpaw, Beloved, and Kingston's grandparents make vivid the need to reconsider and reinform our understanding of history, of its fluid, changing and dynamic relationship to the present. Ghosts redefine the boundaries of narrative in Love Medicine, Beloved and The Woman Warrior. Ghosts and magical

events stretch narrative beyond the staples of realism to include the supernatural.

Erdrich, Morrison and Kingston have in common the practice of subverting narratives by incorporating materials from women's culture and their own culture, materials (e.g. ghosts, supernatural events) which have been dismissed as somehow beneath the rigid standards of realism—"low brow," "low culture." These narrative strategies subvert narrative not only by dispensing with verisimilitude, but by also dispensing with causality and closure. Realist novels in the Western tradition are characterized by conflict and resolution, with a clearly defined protagonist moving along a linear path toward a culmination of some sort, a protagonist who is able to act and effect change in the world. Erdrich's novels do not make a strong commitment to this sort of realism: events, especially in Love Medicine, sometimes have a tenuous connection, and there are occasional disruptions in the rendering of received realities. The story's meaning(s) can be gleaned perhaps from the telling, but certainly not from a plot, an idea which reflects the move in folkloric theory away from placing emphasis on text toward placing it on performance, a move endorsed by theorists such as Barre Toelken, Dan Ben-Amos and Roger D. Abrahams. The focus has moved to the process of folklore and away from the things of folklore. According to Ben-Amos, "folklore is not an aggregate of things, but a process — a communicative process, to be exact" (9).

Part of the distancing from realism can be attributed to the constraints of realism in rendering lives so complicated. The writing by women novelists and writing by minority women about minority women is problematic not only at the level of language, but also at the level of narrative strategy. In this chapter I hope to illustrate how these strategies place Erdrich in a growing tradition of minority women writers who have carved out an aesthetic apart from their Anglo-American counterparts.

Obviously, realism has its limitations in its ability to represent life outside of the middle-class. Because of its assiduous devotion to concrete detail, it is an art form better suited to a material-based culture than a more spiritually-based culture. Very few Native Americans would identify themselves as middle-class; indeed, because they are more isolated economically than most other cultures in America, the class structure in this country would be irrelevant to their lives. And though the realist movement was born out of a political reaction, it can be seen as a reactionary artistic creed. Its tenets imply a tacit agreement about the nature of reality, about certain self-evident truths in regard to individuals and society. Realists aspired merely toward anonymous reportage; but novelists who find realists' tenets false and reactionary would assert that the desire

to remain invisible behind the character and merely to report is nearly impossible to satisfy. Novelists with a social agenda in addition to their artistic agenda, such as Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, find the socially realistic novel an inadequate medium. They have quite different priorities from writers from a realist tradition. "Objectivity" is not the highest virtue in artistic creation, and it is here, in the philosophical divide between objectivity and subjectivity that we find a point of departure for magical realism. Magic realists have generated a different poetic, one that reflects the mysticism of their own cultures, a distrust of rationality, a deep respect for the mysteries of nature, and a recognition of the need for transformation, both psychic and social.[2] They have also, in a literary sense, created a metaphor that has freed them from the constraints of realism.

Magic realism is, quite simply, realism juxtaposed with magic. Magical realism is representation infused with subjectivity, with an occasional imaginative brushstroke. Magical realism would seem a contradiction in terms, the real against the unreal. In order to understand magical realism, we need to understand more clearly what we mean by magic. Our culture's understanding of magic tends to be negative, and this is manifested in the pejorative language used to describe it. Stress is put on the falseness of magic. To reduce magic to simply sleight of hand or deception would be of no use in helping us to enrich our understanding of Erdrich's novelistic universe. This would not help us to sort out various events such as Mary's hands glowing blue, the success of Pauline's curse on Sophie and Eli, Nanapush's willing an arrow to take a true path toward a moose; to dismiss these events as mere deception would dilute the richness of Erdrich's narrative. This reflects a problem that folklorists have been struggling with, that is, finding non-pejorative terms for what they study, e.g. the term superstition which is loaded with negative connotations, connotations which are belittling and dismissive of a culture's beliefs. Magic could be better understood as anything that is supernatural, but even this has connotations that set magic against nature, and to conceive of magic as a violation of nature or natural laws is a purely modern and Western conception. Many cultures, however, do not perceive magic as a violation of natural law, but as part of nature, and see human will and nature in a dynamic equilibrium. Their respect for nature allows them to have a sense of wonder at that which they cannot fathom about nature. With our worship of rational explanation and technology, we devalue nature along with its darker, mysterious side.

So a working definition of magic that we can use in a discussion of magical realism would be anything that happens in the narrative that goes beyond what we expect according to our under-

standing of natural laws. This artistic practice, the use of magical realism in narrative, reflects an artist's desire to mirror the commonplace, the struggles of ordinary people like Wallace Pfef or Gordie Kashpaw, while at the same time to illuminate their striving to find something that transcends the mundane world in which they inhabit. In Erdrich's novels contradiction is the core of the novelistic universe, and it is in keeping with her narrative strategy to intermix the fantastic with the mundane.

The magic in magical realism does not exist for its own sake, for the sake of entertainment; it must express a deeper "truth." David Young, in his introduction to Magical Realist Fiction: An Anthology says that not only is the narrator's attitude toward the magic important, but also how the presentation of the magical event changes the reader's initially rigid concepts of what is real and what is not:

> After seeing ice through the entranced eyes of the natives of Macondo in Garcia Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude, we will never take it quite for granted again, and the relativity of "reality" as we know it will have been made clear to us in yet another way. (1-2)

Other critics have offered more precise definitions. Seymour Menton, who has written a good deal about magical realism, offers this:

> Magical Realism may be defined as the unobtrusive, matter-of-fact insertion by the precise, objective artist or author of an unexpected or improbable (but not impossible) element in a predominantly realistic work which creates a strange or eery effect that leaves the viewer or reader disconcerted, bewildered, or delightfully amazed... In certain stories...everyday, banal occurences are invested with a magical quality because of the author's apparently objective, precise, low-key approach. (256)

First, we should ask, are Erdrich's novels predominantly realistic works? I would say certainly yes. Her narrators are for the most part reliable, and the narrators in these novels report mostly about everyday occurences.

In The Beet Queen we first encounter magic early in the narration when Mary and Sita are sleeping together in the same room. Mary is asleep, but Sita, kept awake by insomnia, sees something unsettling and yells to Mary to wake up. Awakened but not really startled, Mary narrates what she sees:

> So I opened my eyes. The room was half lit. I thought at first that she had left the curtains open, but the light in the room was coming from me, or from my hands, to be entirely exact. They glowed with a dead blue radiance. I lifted them in wonder. The light began to weaken and fade. I shook them, and for a moment they pulsed brightly, as if there had been a loose connection. Then they dimmed no matter what I did until the room was pitch dark again. Only when their light was put out did Sita dare jump from bed, hop to the end of the room, and throw the switch. Her teeth clicked together in fear (77)

One of the characteristics of magical realism is that the narrator reports magical events in a matter-of-fact tone which Mary does.

Given my long and arduous project of defining magic at the beginning of this chapter, identifying it should not be a difficult task. I think most can agree that based on the definitions assembled, what is described in this passage is indeed magic. The larger and perhaps more difficult question I must turn to at the this point is the "why" of the matter. What are the implications involved? The implications of Mary's hands glowing blue are difficult to pin down. How does this impossible event lead to a deeper truth? Can this event in some way express a figurative truth about people like Mary? As we know throughout the novel Mary is a visionary who foresees events before they happen. But she is scoffed at by everyone in the novel, including her best friend Celestine. Later, Mary's predictions about Sita sitting in a Buick the day she dies and Russell's being in a wheelchair come true. Erdrich's point about Mary's incandescence, though hyperbolic, is that some people are more deeply intuitive than others. We are reminded of what Pauline says in Tracks about Fleur, that "power travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth. It comes down through the hands..."(31). We are also pushed to think of Lipsha (in Love Medicine) who had a good deal of power in his hands too, as we recall, he had the "touch." This all relates to the idea that there is much more than knowledge and rationality: there is wisdom and intuition, and the latter tend to get devalued by Western culture in favor of the former. Whatever the implications, this scene does serve the function of disrupting an otherwise realistic narrative, upsetting our expectations, violating the contract between the author and reader of the "realistic" novel.

But let's turn for a moment to Mary's clairvoyance. If we accept the definition of magic as that which violates natural law, then Mary's prescience is certainly a magical element. Mary is able to see the future, to read minds of people around her. In Erdrich's novelistic universe, Mary's powers are very real. As we know from her glowing blue hands and the facial impression of

Christ that she leaves in the snow, Mary, from a very young age, has been perceived as having special powers. Early in the novel she pulls out her fortune-telling cards. Mary studies the cards and then says to Sita, "I hope you like Buicks, because I see that you'll be riding in a Buick on the day you croak" (73). Mary then tells Russell of a woman to whom he will owe a lot of money, and that he will have to pay "through the shorts." We find that Mary is right. At the end of the novel Sita is propped up on the passenger side of the truck, dead, as Mary and Celestine drive her through the parade. Russell rides through the parade in a wheelchair, and the meaning of paying through the shorts becomes clear.

Mary also has the ability to read people's minds, a fact that Celestine takes for granted. Later in the narrative, when Mary and Celestine are late middle-aged women, they rush off to help Sita who is sick and in need of help. Celestine begins ruminating on death and the absurdity of the fact that things survive people. She thinks to herself that everything a person ever touched should be buried along with them. In the midst of her ruminations, Mary offers some relevant information:

> Everything is getting confused. Nothing seems to matter. 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. (278)

Later Celestine has a dream about Sita. They are both much older, mid to late-fifties. In her dream Sita is standing in her front yard. In her dream Celestine sees orange berries glowing behind Sita, ferny leaves tossing in the air, while she looks out on the road, apparently watching for someone. "Her eyes have retreated in bruised pits and her cheeks are sunken, pale as dough...maybe it is the brilliance of the berries in the tree, the blue and white lace of the apron, or Sita's long look of sickness. Whatever it is, the dream is more real than life to me" (265). Celestine tells Mary, and Mary responds by saying that Sita has an illness and "she is asking for you" (265). Mary and Celestine have a collaborative vision, which we find out, is quite accurate. They go to Sita and find her quite ill and in tremendous need of their help. When they get to her house, they find that life replicates the dream:

> Just like in the dream, her hands are twisted in a stiff lace apron. Just like in the dream, the orange berries glow behind her head. She looks sick. (268)

Here, then, clairvoyance has a positive effect on the characters' lives. It also reveals an irony in

Sita's life, for Sita had always relied on men to rescue her, and she finds, finally, that it is her women friends who come to her in her time of greatest need.

These events, Mary's reading of the cards to predict the future and Celestine's dream-vision, are both unnatural events that are accepted matter-of-factly by both Mary and Celestine. But what value is Mary's gift of clairvoyance? Could the knowledge have been used to avoid catastrophe to either Russell or Sita? Probably not. Celestine is not thought of as a clairvoyant in any way, but it is her dream-vision that is most useful as it allows her and Mary to help Sita in her last few days. Or is it? They are not really able to help her as she ends up killing herself anyway. They are too late to rescue Sita from her male-dependent, chemical-dependent lifestyle. But can we detect a countercurrent of the real undermining the magical? Does Erdrich undercut the use of magic by using it in such trivial and non-productive ways? Mary's clairvoyance is of little use because it is so vague and incomplete. It does nothing to warn Sita of the dangers of marrying for security and of putting so much value on her beauty. Nor does her cryptic description of Russell paying through the shorts do anything to inform Russell that his rushing off to fight in the war will only bring him irreversible physical and psychological damage. Mary's description of her vision is so cryptic that it is useless to change the realities of other characters' lives. But this countercurrent undermining magic is befitting Erdrich's work where there are so many currents and countercurrents that the waters become muddy.

Magic realism also upsets the reader's traditional notions of space and time. There are several points in the novels where time seems to expand or conflate, but he most significant and radical upsetting of chronological time comes in Mary's chapter. Mary goes out into the yard at night to lie down and a season passes in an evening:

> The earth was damp, cool, and Mary sank into the grass. It seemed, in her trance, that a great deal of time went by. The plums were green and hard when she first lay down, the mulberry pips invisible, the grass green and pliable. Then the moon came up, stars wheeled in sequin patterns, birds took flight. The season waned as Celestine's baby grew large as day.
> It was a girl, much larger than Mary's lost baby brother, but just as vigorous, and with a headful of blazing dark red curls. She peered at Mary, her eyes the gray-blue of newborns, unfocused but willful already, and of a stubborn intensity that Mary recognized as her own. Then the dark deepened and the night grew deliciously soft. From where she lay, Mary heard the wild plums ripen. They grew plum on their thin stems and fell, knocked off by the wind. In her sleep she heard them drop through the long brittle grass and collect all around her in a glorious waste. (143)

Again, Mary is able to see into the future, to foresee that Celestine's baby, Dot, will be willful and will have a stubborn intensity. We later find that she is right, that Dot/Wallacette is unyeilding and recalcitrant. In "Crossing the Water" Lipsha is narrating the long ride that he takes with Gerry Nanapush up to the Canadian border. Here we have another example of Erdrich conflating time so that chronology is disrupted. Lipsha is narrating his thoughts, incidents and the dialogue between him and Gerry. He comes to a point in the narration when he is about to drop Gerry off at the border. The narration becomes impressionistic and our sense of time collapses:

> He put a hand out and touched my shoulder. There was an odd moment when the car and road stood still, and then I felt it. I felt my own heart give this little burping skip...I felt expansion, as if the world was branching out in shoots and growing faster than the eye could see. I felt smallness, how the earth divided into bits and kept dividing. I felt the stars. I felt them roosting on my shoulders with his hand... A windbreak swallowed him up. I didn't want my lights to show, so I cruised for miles and miles in the soft clear moonlight...(271)

Somewhere between the windbreak swallowing him up and Lipsha's cruising away in the moonlight, Gerry disappears. Time seems to expand, and we are cued in to this when Lipsha says the car and road stood still, implying that space held constant, time moved into eternity.
But again, we have to ask, toward what end is Mary's clairvoyance? How is the knowledge used? Her prescience then becomes trivialized and the harsh realities of life upstage this prescience. We have to ask, too, what are the implications of prescience such as Mary's? Does it imply a certain fatalism: that events will unfold a certain way and human will has very little to do with it? By prophesying Dot/Wallacette's temperment before she is born, there is a suggested belief in determinism. We do have to wonder at the political implications of such a statement. Is the survival or dissolution of a culture completely at the whim of the blind forces of history? Does the idea of determinism provide a pretext for inaction? But perhaps these questions are inappropriate within the context of a non-Western worldview, for they are based on an assumption of linearity, of plot development, of cause and effect. This problem underscores the profound need for developing an aesthetic appropriate for non-Western cultures, an aesthetic that poses questions relevant to the issues and concerns of these cultures. The theme of inevitability is picked up again at the end when Dot jumps on the plane at the beet festival. As she says herself, she sees a thread beginning with her grandmother, passing through her father, and finding its way to her—the act of flight. Dot cannot face the difficult situation placed before her, just as her grand-

mother couldn't and her father couldn't. The novel ends with Dot in bed, paralyzed with inaction, waiting some predetermined outcome.

In Pauline's narration in Tracks there are several magical events. The first to occur follows the rape of Fleur. A tornado touches down in Argus:

> I pitched head over heals along the dirt drive, kept moving and tumbling in such amazement that I felt no fear, past Russell, who was lodged against a small pine. The sky was cluttered. A herd of cattle flew through the air like giant birds, dropping dung, their mouths opened in stunned bellows. A candle, still lighted, blew past, and tables, napkins, garden tools, a whole school of drifting eyeglasses, jackets on hangers, hams, a checkerboard, a lampshade, and at last the sow from behind the lockers, on the run, her hooves a blur, set free, swooping, diving, screaming as everything in Argus fell apart and got turned upside down, smashed, and thoroughly wrecked. (28)

Certainly everything in Pauline's narration is possible, but many things are highly improbable. What is most unlikely in this picture is the uniformity with which things happen. It is not chaotic and haphazard enough to be real. That a cow should fly through the air in a tornado is not impossible though unlikely, but a herd of cattle flying together through the air blatantly defies the law of probability. A candle flies by, still lit. And again, the uniformity of eyeglasses flying by is baffling. And of course jackets flying by on hangers is too orchestrated for our sense of what is probable, what is real. The absurdity of what happens differs from the kind of absurdity we associate with surrealism insofar as the surrealists were less dedicated to seeking visible evidence of a spiritual world then creating the fantastic. In their spiritual searching, the magical realists are closer to the Romantics. But the surrealists and the magical realists have much in common: they both are interested in expanding our perception of reality, and both criticize rationalism.

If magic is defined by an event that goes beyond the laws of nature, then what happens with Dutch James is undoubtedly what we would call magic. During the storm the three men who raped Fleur run into the freezer for protection. Russell James slips the iron bar into place that locked Dutch and the two other men into the freezer. It wasn't until days later that the town went looking for the men, and when they finally found the men, they were frozen to death in the freezer. The image of their frozen bodies is conveyed in realistic detail by Pauline:

> ...they had...hunkered tight, clutching one another, knuckles raw from beating at the door they had also attacked with hooks. Frost stars

> gleamed off their eyelashes and the stubble of their beards. Their faces were set in concentration, mouths open as if to speak some careful thought, some agreement they'd come to in each other's arms. Only after they were taken out and laid in the sun to thaw did someone think to determine whether they were all entirely dead, frozen solid. That is when Dutch James's faint heartbeat was discovered. (31)

Everything in Pauline's narration up until this point has been plausible, but the faint heartbeat is completely in defiance of the laws of nature. Dutch seems to return to life only to rot away, limb by limb, as if death were too lenient a sentence for him. Later on Pauline describes Dutch's recovery:

> Dutch James rotted in the bedroom, sawed away piece by piece. First the doctor took one leg mostly off, then the other foot, an arm up to the elbow. His ears wilted off his head. He was kept dosed with morphine and he sometimes talked long into the night... he would bring a stream of church auxillary women...they could be counted on to bring a torte or flummery, a chicken cut to pieces and cooked pale, a pot of saw beans, a rice ring green with spinach or chard, any one of these the admission price to gaze on Dutch... on seeing him, the ladies' mouths dropped, their breath came fast. (63)

Dutch's survival and recovery is as mystifying as any event that we might find in a novel like <u>One Hundred Years of Solitude</u>, like the insomnia plague that strikes Macondo. In Marquez's novel the inhabitants of the village struck with the insomnia plague do very sensible and rational acts in the midst of this absurdity, e.g., they label everyday objects in order to remember their names; they have rational reactions to irrational elements, calling into question, perhaps, the dichotomy of rational and irrational.

Later in Pauline's narration she is assisting Bernadette Morrissey with the dying. The people on the reservation are dropping like flies from tuberculosis. Pauline is attending to her old schoolmate, Mary Pepewas. After Mary finally dies, Pauline walks out into the yard. And it is here that Pauline narrates another magical event:

> I tore leaves off a branch and stuffed them into my mouth to smother laughter. The wind shook in the trees. The sky hardened to light. And that is when, twirling dizzily, my wings raked the air, and I rose in three powerful beats and saw what lay below. (68)

Pauline tells us that she flies, and throughout her narration and Nanapush's narration, she describes herself as a crow. Nanapush, in referring to how Pauline functions in the community's folklore, describes Pauline as "the crow of the reservation, she lived off our scraps, and she knew

us best because the scraps told our story" (54). Then Pauline tells us that Bernadette had told her that when she was found the next morning, "everyone was shot with fear at the way I hung, precarious above the ground" (68). She goes on to narrate this fantastic event in matter-of-fact, realistic style:

> They were amazed I could climb there, as the trunk was smooth for seven feet and there were no hand- or footholds of any sort. But I remembered everything, and wasn't in the least surprised. I knew that after I circled, studied, saw all, I touched down on my favorite branch and tucked my head beneath the shelter of my wing. Then I slept, black and dreamless....(68-69)

Pauline's metaphorical identification with a scavenger now becomes actual, and magic becomes the bridge that connects the metaphorical to the literal, the fantastic to the real.

Later in the same chapter, Pauline makes a potion to lure Eli toward Sophie. Pauline is determined to see Eli and Sophie have sexual relations as Pauline herself wants Eli but will settle for this vicarious satisfaction. The case of Pauline is an interesting one. As much as she tries to sever her ties to her culture and adopt a more Western, Christian worldview, she is still deeply rooted in this cultural belief about magic and the natural world. Even as she becomes more and more Catholic, she cannot give up her belief about the Manitous that surround her, the ghosts, monsters in Lake Matchimanito, or love potions. Just as firmly rooted as the Western belief that God is above us, that nature is beneath us, is the non-Western belief among Indians that spirits, nature, and humanity all exist in a dynamic equilibrium. In this next magical event Pauline manipulates Sophie's and Eli's behavior, willing them to do what she wants them to do, through a series of tricks. She goes to Moses Pillager for a sack of medicine powder: "The dust that Moses had concocted was crushed fine of certain roots, crane's bill, something else, and slivers of Sophie's fingernails. I would bake it all in Eli's lunch" (80). When the day comes that Pauline arranges for Eli and Sophie to be alone in the woods, Pauline feeds Eli the "charm dust" in his lunch. Then Pauline crouches in a cove of leaves and wills Eli and Sophie onward: "I turned my thoughts on the girl and entered her and made her do what she could never have dreamed of herself. I stood her in the broken straws and she stepped over Eli, one leg on either side of his chest. Standing there, she slowly hiked her skirt" (83). Eli and Sophie proceed to make love apparently under Pauline's control. In Pauline's narration Eli and Sophie are clearly at the mercy of something other than their own wills. Sophie moves toward Eli in a catatonic way. Once he

takes her, Pauline, who is watching from the woods, takes over:

> And I, lost in wild brush, also laughed as they began to rock and move. They went on and they went on. They were not allowed to stop. They could drown, still moving, breathe water in exhaustion. I drove Eli to the peak and then took his relief away and made him start again. I don't know how long, how many hours. Their bodies would grow together and their skins hang loose. Their breasts and thighs would wrinkle like a toad's, their faces puff, their eyes bloat, yet they would move and move. I was pitiless. They were mechanical things, toys, dolls wound past their limits...I let them stop eventually, I don't know how or when. (84)

Part of Pauline's agenda here is to harm Fleur. Pauline, since the beginning of her narrative, has carried an inexplicable malignity toward Fleur. At the beginning of the novel she watches Fleur get raped without trying to stop the men who rape her. It may be that Fleur represents to Pauline everything she fears and dreads, all that she is trying to distance herself from. To her Fleur is unbridled freedom, a creature who lives in the woods where all others fear to go, among ghosts and spirits. Fleur speaks in the old language, she is the last vestige of Pauline's lost culture. She is strong, self-sufficient, fearless and pagan. The nuns in the convent could never rope Fleur in the way they have Pauline. When Pauline sees Fleur standing on the shore of the lake, she appears an existential threat to her secure, Christian worldview:

> Her heavy black clothes, her shawl, the way she held herself so rigid, suggested a door into blackness. I stood before it and then she turned, so slowly I heard the hinges creak. A moment and I was inside where I could not breathe and water filled me, cold and black water of the drowned, a currentless blanket. I thought I would be shut there, but she turned again and off she walked, a black slot into the air, a passage into herself. (200)

However, Pauline's Catholicism does not stand in sharp contrast to a magical worldview. Catholicism is deeply mystical, and the stories of the saints are infused with all kinds of magical events. The next event that Pauline narrates closely resembles one of the stories from the life of Saint Clare. The event involves Sophie, the girl that Pauline has cast a curse on. After it is discovered that Sophie has seduced Eli, she is drawn inexplicably to Fleur's yard where she is forced to kneel "stiff as a soldier, hands a steeple" for days (88). It is implied that Fleur had magically summoned the girl to her yard. Sophie remains locked into that position and finally, when her family comes to get her, they find she is unmovable. Pauline conveys part of the community's lore: "What happened after that is commonly known, part of our history" (91). And what does

happen is mystifying:

> The men arrived. They saw Sophie, still kneeling, tried to pick her up and found she would not budge. They put their weight to her, tried at least to tip her so they could drag her, but they could not shift her one small inch and finally backed away, their fear and confusion gathering. (92)

This story closely resembles the story of Saint Clare which Erdrich writes about in her collection of poetry, Baptism of Desire. The inscription preceding the poem is from The Pocket Dictionary of Saints. Clare refused to marry at age twelve and was so overwhelmed by a sermon given by Saint Francis in 1212 that she ran away from her home in Assisi, received her habit, and took the vow of absolute poverty. At the time, Saint Francis did not have a convent for women, so he placed her in the Benedictine convent near Basia, where she was later joined by her younger sister Agnes. When her father learned of Agnes' whereabouts, he sent twelve armed men to retrieve her. But Clare's prayers made Agnes so heavy that they were unable to move her. As Erdrich says in the poem, "this is called density of purpose" (9). Pauline has a conviction so profound that realism cannot contain it. Catholic mysticism and Indian magic are integrated in the lives of Erdrich's characters, spawning a magic realism that is a kin to that of Latin American: Erdrich's, as Marquez's, serves to illuminate the complexities and mysteries of her character's lives.

Unable to move Sophie, the men run to the church to steal a statue of the Virgin Mother to bring back to Sophie. Clarence holds the statue in front of Sophie (and Pauline, who is now kneeling next to her), wondering "what to do with the statue, how it could be used to dislodge his sister" (93). When he finally lowers it to the ground, Pauline witnesses something magical, something she claims only she and Sophie saw: "I believed it was meant for the girl alone, and for myself" (T 94). Pauline describes the statue in the precise detail of realist representation, but then, as Pauline kneels and gazes at the statue she notices that the Virgin Mother comes to life:

> Although Her expression never changed, She wept a hail of rain from Her wide brown eyes. Her tears froze to hard drops, stuck invisibly in the corners of her mouth, formed a transparent glaze along Her column throat, rolled down the stiff folds of Her gown and struck the poised snake. It was then that the commotion took place, not over the statue's tears, which no one else noticed, but over Sophie, who tried to rise but could not, as her knees were horribly locked, who fell sprawled in the new snow. (94)

Although Pauline tells us that nobody else noticed aside from herself and Sophie, we assume that

something happened which frightened Sophie enough to move her from her position. The actuality of the event is buttressed by Pauline's desire to have "proof" of it when she returns to the Morrissey's. She continues in her narration of the crying Virgin Mother:

> ...and no one noticed when I put out my hand and scooped the hardened tears that lay scattered at Her feet. They resembled ordinary pebbles of frozen quartz, the kind that children collect and save. I dropped them into my skirt pocket and did not imagine how the warmth of my legs would melt them back to tears again, which happened, on the way home, so that by the time I got to the Morrissey house the only proof was the damp cloth that soon dried, and my memory, which sharpened on the knowledge. (95)

All the magical events that happen in Pauline's narration are loaded with metaphorical meaning to her. Her becoming a crow and rising up to a branch implies that Pauline understands herself as a scavenger, living off the death of her own people, living off the scraps of their stories, a lone survivor watching everyone around her perish. That event, as we recall, follows right on the heels of her schoolmate Mary Pepewas' death. Her excessive martyrdom is undoubtedly a reaction to her guilt about surviving and her feelings about being a scavenger. The storm in Argus, with the school of eyeglasses and the still-lit candle flying through the air, reflects the absurdity of things, the absurdity of the rape that she had just witnessed and did nothing to prevent, the absurdity of her position as the last of the Puyats, the absurdity of what had happened to her people. Pauline is struggling to put sense and order into the chaos and decay that surrounds her, and magic provides her a meaningful pattern to events. As she ruminates on the tears from the statue, she has an insight, which might reveal more about her own feelings of empathy than anything about the statue:

> The sympathy of Her knowledge had caused Her response. In God's spiritual embrace She experienced a loss more ruthless than we can imagine. She wept, pinned full-weight to the earth, known in the brain and known in the flesh and planted like dirt. She did not want Him, or was thoughtless like Sophie, and young, frightened at the touch of His great hand upon Her mind. (95)

This reveals Pauline's strong imagination, but also a strongly empathetic character. It also reminds us of Pauline's near sexual encounter with Napolean Morrissey. Pauline's experience with Napolean is an unpleasant one. She is too frightened to speak to him and wants to close her eyes but is afraid not to hold his gaze: "so we pressed together with our eyes open, staring

like adversaries" (73). They are unable to go through with the sexual act, so Pauline lies on the floor, imagining what it would have been like. She imagines sex to be violent, imagines herself being crushed like a powder and being spread across the floor. Sex then, to Pauline's mind, is a dangerous loss of the self. After she imagines this, the fantasy becomes a truth, replacing actual experience as an avenue to knowledge: "I had already satisfied my yearning curiosity. Now I knew that men and women ground their bodies together, sweat and cried out, wept, shoved their hips in motion and fell quiet" (74). For Pauline, fantasy and reality become intertwined and undifferentiated, each as capable as the other in leading the mind toward knowledge and truth. This also reveals the difference between the Western mind and the shamanic mind: the shaman can believe what she sees, still in awe of the powers of nature, but the Westerner rejects what she cannot integrate with rationality as she is more loyal to her reasoning mind than her faith. But magic for Pauline serves a more vital function: it reflects her need and struggle to find something that transcends her brutal reality. The reader's reaction to the magical events is an open one: the reader is put into a position between the two cultures with their respective attitudes towards magic and the reader is free to judge from either side.

Magic makes its way into Nanapush's narration in Tracks as well. In the chapter headed "Fall 1917-Spring 1918, Manitou-geezis, Strong Spirit Sun," Nanapush and Eli Kashpaw are spending a winter together in Nanapush's cabin, going hungry from a shortage of food. When they have completely run out of food, Nanapush sends Eli out on a hunt. Nanapush knows that Eli is inexperienced and needs Nanapush's guidance, so Nanapush begins a magical ritual to help Eli. Nanapush blackens his face with charcoal, places an otter bag on his chest, and begins a song, calling upon his "helpers, until the words came from my mouth but were not mine, until the rattle started, the song sang itself, and there, in the deep bright drifts, I saw the tracks of Eli's snowshoes clearly" (101). Then Nanapush continues to narrate, in extremely careful realistic detail, Eli's search for moose. Nanapush also is able, magically, to enter Eli's mind, to know what he is thinking, what he is feeling, and he is able to communicate to Eli: "Do not sour the meat, I reminded him now, a strong heart moves slowly" (102). Eli responds by moving forward with greater caution, takes aim, but the scrub he is standing in is so dense it might deflect his bullet. But Nanapush's song protects the path of the bullet, so it flies right into the animal, killing it with this first shot. Nanapush is clear about his role in this hunt: he asserts that it was his song that directed the bullet "to fly true" (103). Nanapush's extraordinary vision, his powers of concentration, and his will over the movement of objects external to him are all supernatural. Once again,

Erdrich stretches the bounds of reality, disrupting the realist convention with a magical subversion.

There are more examples of Erdrich's use of magical realism, and I will explore some of them later. Tangential to the issues outside of the novel's universe, such as truth or politics, how does magic tie in with a feminist reading? In her introduction to her book Narrative Magic in the Fiction of Isabel Allende, Patricia Hart, puts forth a theory of what she calls magical feminism. Hart defines magical feminism as magic realism employed in a femino-centric work, or a work that is focused on women. I would broaden this definition, and I think I could do so without corrupting Hart's essential idea, to a work that is focused on gender and gender relations. Hart goes on to suggest that this literary concept could be used to describe a work that uses magic to demonstrate a truth about the female condition.

In "Nine Principles of Matriarchal Art," Heide Gottner-Abendroth derives principles from a description of matriarchal art of the past (81). One characteristic she points to is the use of magic. Matriarchal art, she finds, goes beyond the fictional, and it is here that it becomes magic. Magic, like the dreams produced by our unconscious desires, intrudes into reality with its own system of symbols in order to change reality. In earlier times magic was used in art to change nature. Its aim now is to change social and psychic realities. Magic is misunderstood and dismissed by modern society as primitive, and modern society has lost touch with what Gottner-Abendroth calls the 'ethos of magic.' Earlier societies simply believed that rational-technical knowledge was not enough, that emotion had to be involved as well. Emotion has long been on the female side of the male/female dichotomy, and so where female has been devalued, it would follow that emotionalism and magic be would as well. Earlier, matriarchal societies did not regard nature as quantifiable as we do today, but rather capable of interacting and responding to human communication. Magic is an insistence on integrating emotion with knowledge. It is a more holistic approach to interacting with the world, an approach that does not dismiss the feminine, the emotional. Historically, as patriarchal culture became firmly entrenched, the feminine was submerged and magic was seen as witchcraft and threatening to the social order. Magic is the integration of the intellect, the emotions, human will and the natural environment. For Erdrich's characters, even the ones like Pauline who have severed their ties with the Shamanic universe, there exists an unquestioned belief in magical power. And for Erdrich's readers too there must exist belief. For the author does nothing to mediate or undercut the magical events of the novel. Pauline's attempt to distance herself from her culture fails to dis-

mantle her faith in magic. She goes to Moses Pillager for a concoction (crushed roots, crane's bill, and slivers of fingernails), a love medicine meant to create desire. Pauline never for a moment doubts that the charm dust will work, nor does she doubt her transcendent ability to make others do what she wants them to do.

Erdrich's mythic presentation, the use of lore and magic realism is subversive in that this kind of narrative strategy is typically dismissed and discredited. But in the past couple of decades we have seen how some Latin American and North American writers have employed this strategy because conventional realism was inadequate for conveying certain truths. These techniques are also used by Erdrich to convey truths that sometimes elude our received realities.

* * *

Erdrich clearly wishes to confront a reality unlike that received reality of the West, a reality discredited by the West, a reality and information that we describe as "lore" or "magic." Anything that smacks of the unprovable, of ghosts or gothicism, magic or gossip or lore is traditionally considered second-rate. In Erdrich's narratives, realism and magical realism are on equal footing, each as steady and reliable a vehicle for the truth as the other. Nanapush and Pauline take us into the mystical realm with no qualifications, retractions or apologies.

Erdrich's incorporation of the magical is challenging and subversive because it gaves credibility to that which had long been exiled into the ghetto of the unreal. Toni Morrison, in discussing her own work, underscores the need and the strategy to centralize a worldview that has long been marginalized and trivialized:

> If my work is to confront a reality unlike that received reality of the West, it must centralize and animate information discredited by the West...(388)

Descredited, she means, because it is described pejoratively as "lore," "gossip," or "magic," or "sentiment." The agenda of minority writers like Morrison, Erdrich and Kingston is to strip magic and other elements of their devalued status. Their strategies are provocative in many ways, and the incorporation of magic is subversive because it suggests that nature has a unity with human beings and is not something to be exploited and overcome.

If we are to cast Erdrich into a tradition of women minority writers, and if we are even to presume such a tradition exists (it is, at the least, emerging) then it is necessary to bring to the

reading of these texts a theoretical base that would illuminate the complicated underpinnings of these writer's artistic agendas. Morrison, Kingston, and Erdrich are more subversive in their use of the language, in fact, than most white American women writers, while at the same time they are writing fictions that are highly accessible to mass audiences. They all write with a grace and a simplicity that at times can be deceptive. They are subversive without being obscure. The point of their subversion is the need to find a literary method which can convey the texture, the contradictions, and the complexities of their lives, which realism cannot adequately contain. All three of these writers revel in their mixed identities, and infuse much of their culture's worldview in the way of ghosts and magic into their writings. They have indeed spawned a new tradition in American literature that is distinctly cross-cultural. Through their use of magic and ghosts they have been able to upset our received realities, to unsettle our understanding of history, to reveal the invisible, and consider possibilities for transforming untenable social realities.

NOTES

[1] Rabinowitz, Paula. "Naming, Magic and Documentary: The Subversion of Narrative in Song of Solomon, Ceremony and China Men," in Feminist Revisions. Patraka, Vivian and Louise A. Tilly, eds. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983. Rabinowitz's essay was quite useful, not only in this chapter, but in helping me to understand Erdrich's work as part of an emerging tradition and contextualizing what I have identified as subversive strategies at work in Erdrich's writing.

2 Hart, Patricia. Narrative Magic in the Fiction of Isabel Allende. Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989.
Though all of Hart's work is devoted to Allende and the socio-political context which helped to shape Allende's aesthetic, I found much of Hart's insights useful in my reading of Erdrich. Hart also coined the term magical feminism, a concept that could and should be of interest to scholars American minority women writers.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION: THE AESTHETICS OF MARGINALITY

Women, Native Americans and colonized people all over the world are relegated to the periphery of the dominant cultures. The indigenous people of the Americas had been regarded by the whites who came to the continent as dark, mysterious, savage, different and therefore dangerous, so the goal of manifest destiny had been to move the indigenous out, quite literally, to the margins. Women too have been cast into the periphery of white, patriarchal society. Helene Cixous has written about her experience of being three times excluded from French patriarchal society because she is a woman, a Jew, and a Pied Noir. Marguerite Duras claims that women and the marginal share the same off-centered discourse.[1]

All of Erdrich's characters are marginalized: unwed mothers, gay men, alcoholics, the unemployed, the poor, Native American, the mentally ill, Vietnam veterans. They are the dislodged, the displaced, out of space and out of time. Erdrich's characters are the damaged, the disinherited, the discarded and the disregarded - Native Americans exiled in their own homeland. But contemporary women writers like Erdrich are seeking to discover from within the dark, hidden places of the margin a source of power, as Audrey Lord describes it, a "language of difference whereby we give name to the nameless...and issue from a dark, inner sphere...the hidden place of power" (qtd. in Lamont, 140). The power of characters like June and Fleur is a transgressive one, and their strength derives from their marginality. Though June dies at the beginning of Love Medicine, she returns continually and powerfully into the lives of the other characters, including her son King, and her husband Gordie. Fleur's nature too is supernatural and transgressive, and those on the reservation who recognize such transgressive powers know to fear her. In this chapter I will examine how the issue of marginality is treated both thematically and formally, and

how it is both a source of power and powerlessness for some of Erdrich's characters. I will also examine how the dichotomy of the center and the margin is modified by Erdrich into a dichotomy between the town and the woods, analogous to the dichotomy between nature and culture. The trope of the town signifies Law: patriarchal control and order, bourgeois values and institutions. The trope of the woods signifies its antithesis — anarchy and chaos. They contain the uncontainable yearnings of the female libidinal economy. Erdrich's spare novels contain anarchic and archaic pulsations: her female narrators, especially Pauline Kashpaw, articulate a yawning abyss.

Formally we find that Erdrich does away with a center in all of her novels: there is no centralized, mediating consciousness in any of the three novels, but rather an off-centeredness in the multiplicity of voices that narrate their own stories. This off-centeredness is especially pronounced in Love Medicine where the number of voices is greater than in the other two novels and the connection between narrators most tenuous. Love Medicine builds from a fragmentary aesthetic; it is a collage of fragments. There seems to be no order, no organizing sense to the collected memories; memories, digressions, stories seem to flow like the dark , thick, twisting river that Lipsha describes at the end of the novel.

Two of the novels, Love Medicine and Tracks, are narrated from the margins. The narratives within Love Medicine whirl around along the margins. And throughout Erdrich's novels there is an erotic tension that emanates from the dark and mysterious regions. Power emanates from the dark regions, the woods near Matchimanito, from beneath the lake, from the invisible. Events proceed often in these dark spheres. So much of each novel is infused and dominated by the indominatable: the dark mysterious places of female erotic power. June Kashpaw fills nearly every page with her non-presence in Love Medicine. Fleur Pillager in the same way pervades Tracks. Female erotic power creates its own inner space, vast and unknowable and therefore threatening. I will explore this persistent erotic tension at greater length in my discussion of Pauline Kashpaw in Tracks.

Marginality in Erdrich's fictional universe has been turned into a source of power, perhaps a

power more formidable than that of the central reigning powers. In Erdrich's novels there is the collision of two cultures, two systems of thought which appear to threaten the identity of many of the characters and hence threaten to weaken them. However, some of the characters straddle the two worlds comfortably, learning perhaps to gain from each what is valuable, creating a synthesis out of this seeming contradiction. Catholicism, its Western longing for domination and transcendence, and Shamanism, the Indian longing for cosmic integration, reconciliation and harmony, provide a powerful combination. Pauline is a character who has most visibly synthesized these two worldviews and in this new consciousness has found the means not only to endure, but to transcend her miserable circumstances.

Julia Kristeva too has focused on women as chronically marginalized. In "A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident," Kristeva asserts that there are three types of dissidents in modern society: the intellectual who attacks political power, the psychoanalyst, and the experimental writer who seeks to undermine the symbolic order. And finally she adds that women, simply on the basis of their gender, are another form of dissidence. Her point of departure is the Hegelian dialectical relationship between Human Law and Divine Law. Human law is associated with man, governments and ethics, whereas Divine Law is female, associated with religion, mysticism, reproduction, death (death being the absolute law). Men then become associated with the clear laws of conscious existence, and women "the dark right of the nether world" (296, 297). Human law also governs the workings of language and especially, meaning, and because she is exiled from Human Law, woman is exiled from meaning. She is the id to man's superego, the fragmentation, the drive, the unnameable, that fragmentation prior to meaning or to name which Kristeva says has been labeled the "Daemon." Women in Erdrich often become associated with this dark nether world, women like Fleur, Lulu Lamartine, and Pauline. Fleur is thought of as a demon, a witch, and the woods near Matchimanito where she lives is thought of as a hell, which becomes especially clear when Fleur returns and makes the woods her home. A black dog that stalks the turnoff at Matchimanito is seen as a form of the devil. Fleur is something archaic, capable of unleashing malevolent forces.

There is much historical support for Kristeva's contention about women's permanent exile: women have been excluded from the seats of power, exiled to the home, deprived of rights. Though Kristeva focuses primarily on women's exclusion from the symbolic system, there are other factors which contribute to their marginalized status. Women writers are often marginalized for their choice of genre. So many women writers have used genres that are considered lower forms of literature: Ursula K. LeGuin and science fiction and fantasy, Margaret Atwood and her dystopian The Handmaid's Tale, Mary Shelley and Atwood's gothic, and of course the oral tradition, the magical realism and the folkloric novels of Kingston, Morrison and Erdrich. It is important to qualify that these genres are not exclusively the province of women writers; certainly many great male writers have made this generic choice. It is just that women more often tend toward these genres because they free the writers from the strictures of the socially realistic novel. These are relegated to the margins while tragedy and the Bildungsroman are centralized. A book like Love Medicine may well be disparaged by the critical community for its formlessness, its plotlessness. The emphasis on plot too is a masculinist compulsion toward order and sharply outlined patterns that we have been taught to seek. But the plot and its dependence on forward moving, mechanical, linear time may not be a suitable vehicle to convey the experience of Native Americans or women.

THE BEET QUEEN

In The Beet Queen marginalization is treated at two levels: structurally and thematically. As with all of her novels there is no central or unifying consciousness. The story is conveyed only from the margins. There is no central character or characters. Some characters such as Celestine and Mary do dominate the discourse more than other characters such as Russell Kashpaw or Jude Miller. Precisely there are six narrating characters in this novel with none priveleged over the others; a disembodied voice narrates a few of the chapters. These anonymously narrated chapters are often titled with a character's name followed by "night," e.g., "Sita's Night." Things thus proceed only in the night, in the dark. As I will show throughout this chapter, the dichotomy of center and margin correlates with a dichotomy of light and dark, and, day and

night. These characters live in the shadows and it is only apt that they are viewed by the disembodied voice recurrently at night. As I have said, Erdrich does use a third-person disembodied voice in The Beet Queen only, but this voice is not privileged: it is on equal footing with the others, and it is not omniscient, but generally limited.

In The Beet Queen, patriarchal sexual politics is challenged by the sexual politics of the marginal. Mary Adare and Celestine James have no real need for marriage or men. Mary Adare even throws off the institution of motherhood, and Celestine James would prefer the choice of single parenthood to the safety of the acceptable institution of marriage. Neither Mary nor Celestine marry or have their own family, but create a family out of friendships. Mary, Celestine, and Wallace equally participate in parenting Dot. All the characters in The Beet Queen are outcasts, but Mary, Celestine, Dot and Wallace have created a community of outcasts, and just as the forward movement of the narrative depends on collaboration, survival depends upon cooperation and interdependence, challenging the ideal of supreme independence, a myth strongly adhered to by our culture.

Karl Adare, Mary's brother, is forever on the periphery, occasionaly dropping in from the outskirts, gladly accepting his role as a dark, sinister figure, or eponymously, the "pure black flame." Karl lives with his bisexuality in the shadows, moving across the backdrop of this novel, from motel to motel. He and Mary were abandoned by their mother as young children, and whereas Mary chose to go to Argus to find whatever family remains to piece together a community, Karl chooses to run, and has been living on the run since. Karl breezes into and out of various chapters, remaining loosely attached to the other characters. He is without a center, a travelling salesman with few ties. Karl is defined by constant motion and escape. Later on in the novel the disembodied voice of the narrator describes Karl's sadly ironic condition: "He was so used to driving, so used to distance and movement, that he sometimes found it hard to focus properly on anything within the reach of his arms" (256). In his last chapter near the end of the novel, Karl meditates on his life on the periphery.

There are repeated references to shadows as the dichotomy of the center and the periphery

becomes a dichotomy of light and dark. The marginalized characters in these novels often are lurking in the shadows:

> ..I sat there and the shadows gathered and the lizards scraped
> along the tiles, I made less and less sense, too, until I made
> none at all. I was part of the senseless landscape...
> I give nothing, take nothing, mean nothing, hold nothing. (318)

Karl returns to Argus at the end of the novel and gets lost in the confusion of the Beet Parade. The last time his name is mentioned is when Celestine and Dot are walking home from the parade. They pass Wallace Pfef's house, and they see Karl's car parked there, poised "for a smooth exit" (338). We assume Karl will live out the rest of his days on the run, without an anchoring to anything, without a home, ungrounded, endlessly displaced.

Jude Miller, Mary and Karl Adare's orphaned brother, is the quintessential outsider. Jude is an infant when Adelaide, his mother, runs off with the stunt pilot from an air show. Jude is deposited in Mary's hands and then taken away by a total stranger, a man whose wife just delivered a baby who died three days after birth. This couple, desperately poor, name the baby Jude, "the patron saint of lost causes, lost hopes, and last-ditch resorts" (45). They too are marginal characters, a Steinbeckian couple of down and outers. Jude's marginalized status is underscored by his lack of contribution to the storytelling. Jude does not narrate at all in this novel; a disembodied voice narrates the two chapters in which Jude appears as an adult: at the orphan's picnic and as the passenger getting off the train to Argus to search for his remaining and scattered family.

The only character who has a glimpse of the center is Wallace Pfef, but because of his homosexuality, he ends straddling both worlds. Wallace tries to appear a respectable citizen:

> I have never married, but I do have a girl friend referred to
> by the people of Argus as 'Pfef's poor dead sweetheart.'
> Her photograph, in its polished brass frame, keeps discreet
> watch over my living room...To tell the truth, I don't know the
> woman in the picture...because of the poor dead sweetheart,
> I've never had to marry. (159)

Wallace knows the pain of living a life shrouded in secrecy, the difficulty of difference. But he also knows how to gain access to power and knows the advantages of being on the margins as well as the advantages of belonging. The advantages of being on the margins lie in the freedom

it holds. Wallace has no regrets looking back upon his life and the course it took. The location of the house he builds serves as a nice metaphor for his relationship to society:

> I never regret having built so far out of town, on the road out of Argus, heading north, even though it is rarely traveled by any but those who must...my view is a stark horizon of grays and browns...(160)

But he also knows the powerlessness of being marginalized, and he knows that to bring change he has to integrate himself into the realms of power, and being a white, educated male, he knows that he can cross those lines: "In town I've joined up with a vengeance, for I know that within the fraternal orders lies power. Eagles, Moose, Kiwanis, Elk. I need to belong" (160). Wallace Pfef lives out the rest of his life alone, and his alienation is both a source of happiness and sorrow.

Dot Adare is described by Albertine Johnson as "of the has-been, of the never-was, of the what's-in-front-of-me people." We first meet her in Love Medicine where she is a minor character. It is not until we meet her again in The Beet Queen that she becomes a full-blown character. From the moment of her birth we know that she is going to be different, unmanagable, radical and on the margins. When Mary and Celestine take her to school on the first day, Mary recognizes that Dot will not fit in with the other children despite Celestine's attempts to have her accepted: "Celestine had brought along a box of bakery cookies, a treat she gave to the teacher in order to ensure her daughter's welcome with the other children. But I could see that the cookies didn't matter, not only then, but ever" (182). Mary goes on to describe Dot as the wolf ready to descend on the fold. Her classmates perceive her as the permanent other, the odd one, who arrives at school, not with a mother and a father, but with two odd women flanking her. She is the unknown among familiars (she skips kindergarten and goes directly into first grade where all the other children know one another), who strikes terror into the hearts of the other children: "the boys went mute and the spines of the little girls stiffened like pulled twine" (182). Again, Mary underscores Dot's marginalized status by comparing her to a "hawk" among "sparrows," at once identifying Dot's peripheral position and suggesting the power that Dot has already apparently

derived from that position, for certainly she is not a sparrow among hawks. Dot's alienation from the others at school only intensifies the older she gets. Her godfather Wallace observes her marginalized status with empathy and notes that Dot "was persecuted, miserable, plotting her own revenge. Instead of her grade-school lack of friends, she now had active enemies" (301). And in high school she joins the group of outsiders, "the hoods, drinkers, smokers, motorcycle riders, and assorted deadbeats who haunted the streets of bars that did not donate to the Christmas Lighting Fund" (301). On the periphery Dot finds her niche. She even begins to grow alien and bewildering to her mother, her aunt and her uncle Wallace. But Dot's marginalization does not weaken her; rather, she seems to grow harder and tougher on the knowledge of her difference. She embraces her marginalization in a way that Wallace could not. And Wallace admires her for it: "But she was what I was not. She was not afraid to be different, and this awed me" (302). But despite her strength in accepting her marginalized stance, life on the margins is still quite difficult:

> She told of parties to which she was not invited, good-looking hoods who ignored her, girls who filled her locker with balled-up paper towels, teachers who asked her questions in class they knew she couldn't answer, even janitors who waxed the halls so she would slip and embarrass herself. (303)

Dot's marginalized status can be attributed primarily to the fact that she is not like other girls in terms of behavior and appearance, but it is inappropriate behavior more than anything that separates Dot. She is not demure, but, rather knows exactly what she wants and demands it greedily. She does not play into the game of sexual politics with its rigid assignment of gender stereotypes. When she has a crush on one of the boys in the school play, she does not act coy and coquettish, but rather approaches him directly, demanding his affections, and, when they are denied, she hits him over the head. Dot is willful, and willfulness in women is to be disguised and covertly exercised, and Dot is unable to be anything but overt and direct. And Dot is not soft and fleshy like the other girls. She is solid, built like a wrestler. When she gets to high school she joins the track team to be a shot-putter and is told she will be good because she is "dense" for her

height. Dot has her moments, however, when she dreams of fitting in, of being one of the girls, sought after for her beauty. She even goes along with her nomination as beet queen at the Beet Festival and tries to be ladylike. But she finds that the role fits her as poorly as the green dress she has to wear for the beet parade, and she makes her escape before she is crowned.

LOVE MEDICINE

Dot's marginalization becomes even more pronounced when we move to Love Medicine . Here we find Dot only as a passing reference in Albertine Johnson's narration. Dot gets no voice in this novel. Dot, Albertine and Gerry Nanapush are sitting in a bar on the edge of some small Dakota town, on their third or fourth round of drinks. Gerry, a Chippewa Indian, is an alcoholic who has been in and out of prison for half his life. Gerry too is one of the marginalized, "not in the clear yet nor would he ever be," hiding behind the dark of his glasses. (156) Dot gets a job working for the state weighing trucks out on the highway at truck stops, one of those invisible state employees that move through our society unnoticed. In Love Medicine Dot seems to fade away into the vast North Dakota landscape. It certainly strikes us as odd that such a strong presence as Dot, as we know her from The Beet Queen, is so distant and inconsequential in the first novel, without a voice, without perspective. But this seeming contradiction replays a historical actuality of a very strong people being cast into the margins, strong and enduring, yet rendered voiceless and powerless.

Among the marginalized in Love Medicine are the orphans of which there are plenty. June is a child left stranded by her parents with only a string of Cree beads to her name, deposited on Marie Kashpaw's doorstep. June, though a powerful character for her pervasive and lasting memory, is without voice and perspective in this novel. We first meet her in the opening chapter of the novel, a down and out Chippewa women who is picking up men in bars apparently to support her heavy drinking. She is attempting to get back home, but never makes it, and her spirit wonders indefinetely through the novel. Though the last line of the chapter suggests that June comes back "home" we wonder if the reservation ever really was a home to her. We know

that her marriage with Gordie was stormy and violent and therefore unsustainable. June, it seems, never was able to find a home either among her own on the reservation or among the white men she picked up in bars in the white towns. We sense that she was looking for a home with these men when she thinks to herself that maybe this man whom she has picked up would be different, unlike perhaps, the other one-night stands.

June's son, Lipsha Morrissey, is also marginalized and confronts his status as an orphan, as one of the abandoned. He is told by his grandmother that June wanted to tie him in a potato sack and throw him into a slough when he was a baby. But Lipsha's being an orphan does not disempower him in any way. He is lucky enough to be raised by his grandmother, Maria Kashpaw, a very strong character. Lipsha too is strong, a strength acquired apparently from his mother, but much of his strength also seems to come from his ability to extract from his cultural background wisdom and a sense of community that extends beyond the nuclear family.

Lulu Lamartine's house is full of "illegitimate" children. Her boys were fathered by different men, and the confusion of names and paternal attachments is of little significance to Lulu. Lulu herself is a marginalized character for her sexually "inappropriate" behavior and her supposed sorcery. Her alienation is a double one, for not only is she alienated from the dominant culture, but she is also alienated from the reservation. When she attends a meeting about the selling of family lands to the government, Lulu stands up alone in protest. She is scorned by the reservation for her sexual freedom, but she disregards their rejection. She too finds power from her marginalized position and is ready to expose all the hypocrites hiding at the meeting. She challenges the entire gathering, which had grown to nearly a hundred people, and when she does so, she sees "the back neck hair on the wives all over that room prickle" (224).

The number of voices in Love Medicine grows, and it seems that multiplicity underscores marginality. Erdrich grants point-of-view to the voiceless. In "Crossing the Water," we are given the perspective of Howard Kashpaw, King's son, who grows up in a violent and chaotic home and whose father is an alcoholic. Howard is apparently too young, roughly six or seven, to articulate the complexity of his feelings, his pain, rage and grief. However, the disembodied

voice of the narrator allows us into Howard's perspective. The chapter opens with Howard sitting on the bathroom floor, apparently hiding from his parents who are fighting. The scene is little more than a sketch, but in his perception we find the fear of childhood, the fear of not being able to understand the screaming and the violence, or the police who came to the door "to snap the circles on big King's wrists." In this restricted and impressionistic sketch the reader experiences the feeling of marginalization, the powerlessness of Howard's situation.

Gerry Nanapush, too, is one of the marginalized. A Chippewa, a recovering alcoholic, a felon on the run, he is permanently exiled to the periphery. He also knows the powerlessness of being on the margins. When he is first arrested for getting into a fight with a cowboy he finds that the legal system is stacked against him. Gerry first of all does not fight by the "rules," he does not fight like a gentleman, not on the cowboy's terms, at least. He finds the legal system stacked against those on the margins and working more favorably for whites:

> [Gerry] also found that white people are good witnesses to have on your side, because they have names, addresses, social security numbers, and work phones. But they are terrible witnesses to have against you, almost as bad as having Indians witness for you. (162)

Gerry spends the rest of his days living on the run, hiding from authorities on reservations. Gerry does not show up again until near the end of the novel, in Lipsha Morrissey's chapter. Again Erdrich employs the dichotomy of light and dark. When dark descends on the household an announcement comes over the television that Gerry Nanapush had escaped. It isn't much longer that Gerry emerges from the dark shadows: "...he stood, enormous, gentle, completely blocking the silvery rays..." (258). The police track him down again, however, and his emergence from the shadows is quite brief. The last we see of Gerry is at the end of the narrative when Lipsha drives him to the Canadian border, drops him off, and Gerry disappears again into the dark.

TRACKS

The narrators in Tracks are Nanapush and Pauline, both marginalized characters. We know that Nanapush did receive a Jesuit education, but he returns to live out his life in the woods. The focus of his and Pauline's narratives is Fleur Pillager who lives entirely on the margins, having been forced out of Argus and back to the reservation by the three white men who rape her, and in doing so let her know that her place is not at the poker table with the men, but back in the shadows, among the invisible. So Fleur moves back to the reservation but not on it. She moves out into the woods on the edge of the reservation, a place where the locals fear to tread because of ghosts. But in the margins Fleur finds empowerment for herself. She becomes a threat to the tribe too:

> The whole tribe got to thinking that she couldn't be left alone out there, a woman gone wild, striking down whatever got into her path. People said that she had to be harnessed. (45)

Nanapush too knows the power hidden in the darker recesses of the margin, and after his Jesuit education "ran back to the woods and forgot all [his] prayers." Indeed, as he learns from his father, the very name, Nanapush, has to do with trickery and living in the bush.

The erotic tension of Erdrich's writing partly lies in this very issue—the interplay of darkness, the woods against light and the town, the interplay of the hidden and the exposed. In Erdrich's novels power emanates from the dark hidden places, the woods at Matchimanito where Fleur's unbridled sexual energy resides. Female sexuality too is hidden and buried in the bush; female sexual geography is dark and mysterious to men. And this erotic tension is persistent throughout her novels, especially in Tracks. Marguerite Duras speaks of an all-pervasive presence of the female erotic consciousness. For men, she says, the quenching of desire is direct, fairly simple; for women there is a persistent erotic tension which creates its own inner space, vast and uncharted. This persistent erotic tension, according to Duras, is a form of transgression. Society, she says, has always tried to bridle this passion, to enclose it within the institution of marriage" (144). Fleur Pillager in Tracks comes to represent unbridled female sexuality, so closely identi-

fied with the dark, mysterious places in the woods, the bush. When she returns to the reservation, her presence frees the repressed (female sexual desire):

> The dust on the reservation stirred. Things hidden were free to walk. The surprised young ghost of Jean Hat limped out of the bushes around the place his horse had spooked, and on the darkest nights his cart rumbled through our yards. A black dog, the form of the devil, stalked the turnoff to Matchimanito. (34, 35)

Pauline narrates Fleur's life in the woods before she left to go to Argus. Pauline struggles against Fleur throughout the narrative, frightened of the power of Fleur's libidinal drives, frightened of her own libido, channeling it instead into the other, into Sophie, for instance. Pauline speaks of Fleur's being alone in the woods, untamed, unknowable, and threatening:

> Alone out there, she went haywire, out of control. She messed with evil, laughed at the old women's advice and dressed like a man. She got herself into some half-forgotten medicine, studied ways we shouldn't talk about. (12)

> Her unrestrained sexuality has both an intoxicating and frightening effect on men:
> She knew the effect she had on men...she swayed them, sotted them, made them curious about her habits, drew them close with careless ease and cast them off with the same indifference. (16)

Fleur becomes a stalking non-presence, hidden away in the bush where most men fear to go, except, of course, Eli Kashpaw, who is drawn there despite his fears. The woods become Fleur's place, her dominion, a place of mystery, where libidinal impulses go unchecked. When Eli finally finds a way to appease Fleur and gains admission to her place in the woods, the sexual activity between the two is so unrestrained that it becomes mythologized and part of the community's lore. They are bold in their lovemaking, and the whole reservation gossips. Margaret, Eli's mother, is shocked by the freedom with which they carry on:

> Who learned my Eli to make love standing up! Who learned him to have a woman against a tree in clear daylight....Against the walls of the cabin, down beside it. In grass and up in trees. Who'd he learn that from? (48)

In Erdrich's fictional universe, there is a split between two universes, that of the town and that of the woods (the center and the margin). As stated above, the settings of the novels move between these two places, places which become tropes, the woods figuring for unbridled erotic love, darkness, magic and trickery and the town figuring as a place of order and bourgeois life and material goods. The reservation too lies outside the center, but it figures ambiguously, being neither clearly centralized or marginalized. At times it stands in counterpoint to the town, but at other times it seems to replicate the town and its values and stands contrapuntally against the woods. In The Beet Queen the reservation stands in counterpoint to the town. When Sita is taken away from her wedding and dumped off at the reservation, she appears an odd and frightening figure in her expensive wedding dress, an emblem of bourgeois power, if only temporarily deposed. "It's a fucking queen," remarks one of the women in the bar. The sexual freedom of the reservation challenges and undermines the constraining sexual mores of the town and its institutions. The rules and the proprieties (which is interestingly close in spelling to property) of the town are overturned on the reservation. Later in the novel, when Mary, Celestine, and Dot take a trip to the reservation to visit Russell and to bring him a wheelchair, they perceive a vast difference in orientation. In Argus people think Celestine is strange, "even disreputable," in Mary's words, for having a child so late in life by a flighty husband who only married her after the baby was born. This contrasts sharply with life in the woods, life on the margins. Here they encounter Eli Kashpaw, Russell's half brother, and Fleur's lover. Eli is a highly marginal figure who has only been off the reservation twice. Eli, we learn, took in a child, a girl named June whom he raised to hunt and trap, hide from game wardens, a girl whom we learn turns out to be even wilder than him. When Eli meets Mary and Celestine he is mystified by their apprehension, unaccustomed to women who are demure. In turn, Mary and Celestine are taken aback by Fleur's unflinching directness and strength.

The contrast between the town and the woods is manifested in Erdrich's use of a light and dark dichotomy. Mary's description upon first arriving at Matchimanito is full of observations about light and dark. She first sees Russell emerge from a "little wedge of shade." Dark himself,

he blends in well with the "mottled light and dark of the house," so dark that Dot doesn't see him at first. And then Eli appears from a "dim tangle of bushes." In Tracks Nanapush describes the woods at Matchimanito, most likely the location where Mary and Celestine meet Eli:

> ...people don't like to go there. Those trees are too big, thick and twisted at the top like bent arms. In the wind their limbs cast, creak against each other, snap. The leaves speak a cold language that overfills your brain. You want to lie down. You want to never get up. You hunger. You rake black chokecherries off their stems and stuff them down...(42)

The forest comes to represent the place of hunger, of desire, of libidinal urges. Cixous has written about the threat that female sexual desire poses to patriarchal control. Cixous writes of the story of Little Red Riding Hood as a parable about female sexuality. The imagery of a little red riding hood is powerfully suggestive, the red riding hood being the locus of female sexual pleasure, the forest the vast, dark, unknowable and unmanageable place of desire and libidinal drives, the Big Bad Wolf the source of repression:

> The Big Bad Wolf represents, with his big teeth, his big eyes... that great Superego that threatens all the little female red riding hoods who try to go out and explore their forest without the psychoanalyst's permission. (45)

Erdrich too is making use of the imagery of the forest in this way, where the woods at Matchimanito are dominated by female erotic energy and the town dominated by masculine repressive law. Fleur is spoken of as a woman who is feared and who needs to be tamed. When Fleur sweeps into town she is threatening and stirs things up, undermining the rigid rule which is encoded in a language that is distinctly masculine, decidedly phallic. When she arrives in town to seek revenge for Margaret, Clarence and Lazarre, order and control are threatened, and the two men who see her drop "their cue sticks" (119) and run off in different directions.

This persistent erotic tension is most pronounced in Pauline's narration in Tracks. For Pauline, there is an incessant and nagging erotic tension that is at war with her asceticism. Pauline struggles with her peripheral stance, trying desperately to distance herself

from Indian culture. Throughout her narrative she reveals an ambivalence about her invisibility, using it at first as a means of protection, then struggling against it to gain male attention, and then finally using it as a source of empowerment. Early in life she is aware of her marginal status, rebels against her family's Indian ways : "I would not bead...refused to prick my fingers with quills, or hid rather than rub brains on the stiff skins of animals," and leaves the reservation in time before the illness sweeps through which leaves her without a family (14). She becomes three times alienated, a woman, an Indian, and an orphan. Living with her Aunt in Argus, she first recognizes her invisibility:

> I was fifteen, alone, and so poor-looking I was invisible to most customers and to the men in the shop. Until they needed me, I blended into the stained brown walls, a skinny big-nosed girl with staring eyes. (16)
> And immediately Pauline discovers the benefits of invisibility:
> From this, I took what advantage I could find. Because I could fade into a corner or squeeze beneath a shelf I knew everything: how much cash there was in the till, what the men joked about when no one was around, and what they did to Fleur. (16)

Pauline is always lurking behind the scenes, watching, reporting. Her invisibility grows throughout the narrative, but it grows proportionately with her powers. Pauline's means to power is not a visible, open, and aggressive one but rather invisible, mysterious and passive. The more invisible she grows the more she resorts to magic to manipulate those around her. The power she derives is the power of the marginalized, invisible rather than visible, subversive rather than assertive. Pauline goes underground to get what she wants, starts wearing black clothes, runs to the woods to find Moses Pillager who provides her with magic powders. Certainly Pauline learned from Fleur's rape that women who do assert themselves openly are imperiled.

Pauline is the perpetual loner who is orphaned at an early age and does not confront the fact of her being abandoned as Lipsha does, but rather chooses to forget about it. Pauline tries to forget all her childhood companions and her mother and sisters. The disappearance of her family coincides with her sense of her own inevitable disappearance, becoming more and more evident throughout her narration. During the poker game Fleur plays with the men, Pauline remains

hidden with her little cousin Russell in the shadows, watching. She comes to a realization about her presence:

> I put the coins on her palm and then I melted back to nothing,
> part of the walls and tables, twined close with Russell. It
> wasn't long before I understood something that I didn't know then.
> The men would not have seen me no matter what I did, how I moved.
> (19)

Throughout Pauline's narration she employs the dichotomy of light and dark, and makes repeated references to shadows, shade and so on. Soon after this passage Pauline describes herself as Fleur's "moving shadow," and "the shadow that could have saved her" (22). And further on, she dreams of being freed from the periphery, active, no longer passive, "no longer the watcher on the dark sill, the skinny girl" (31). But throughout the novel, she is always associated with the dark, enveloped, and cloaked in dim light. When she watches Sophie seduce Eli, she watches from the brush:

> Eli stared after her and saw through me, still as the iron
> wedge I sat on, dark in a cool place. He could not see into
> the shadow. (81)

She becomes progressively more invisible when she moves back to the reservation and begins to assist Bernadette with tending to the dead. She dresses in black, and those who do see her dread her, but to others she is not even there: "...I was more invisible than ever in my black clothes..." (75).

There is a distinct ambivalence that Pauline has toward her marginal status. At times she is able to derive power from living among the shadows, but at other times there seems to be an existential panic in her perception of herself as nothing, a sentiment we hear echoed in Karl's narration when he imagines himself part of a senseless landscape, feeling that his life has no meaning. And as we see later, when Pauline rows out into the middle of the lake to look for a sign from God, she is disappointed and is only able to see Fleur, who to her represents a black door into nothing, a void into which Pauline feels drawn:

> A moment and I was inside where I could not breathe and water filled me, cold and black water of the drowned, a currentless blanket. I thought that I would be shut there, but she turned again and off she walked, a black slot into the air, a passage into herself. (200)

Pauline alternates between jealousy of Fleur's unrestricted libido and fear of it, replicating the male relationship to female sexuality. Pauline perceives Fleur's eroticism as endless and engulfing. Once while watching Fleur from afar she has the feeling of being pulled into this vast, endless, erotic space.

Though Pauline tries to ignore her own libidinal drives, she is constantly overpowered by their nagging persistence. Her narration is consistently sensual and at times even sexy: some of Pauline's passages are powerful examples of Erdrich's ability to write from the body. Pauline's narration at its best is pulsing with female erotic energy, brimming with female desire. She is very sensitive to the sexual dynamics between Fleur and Eli, and it invariably stirs her own libidinal energy: she speaks of the sexual tension between Eli and Fleur and describes its effect on her. Pauline finds the language to articulate female desire in its subtle complexity:

> ...I saw the signs...I sensed touching, an odor, a warmth like sun streaming down on skin for an afternoon...they smelled like animals, wild and heady...they made my head hurt. A heaviness spread between my legs and ached. The tips of my breasts chafed and wore themselves to points and a yawning eagerness gripped me. (72)

Even looking at the statue of the Virgin Mother she interprets the tears of the Virgin as stemming from God's erotic embrace. She projects her own erotic imaginings onto the Virgin, sexualizing a religious figure that the Catholic church has presented as desexualized (a sympton of the patriarchy's fear of female sexuality):

> In God's spiritual embrace She experienced a loss more ruthless than we can imagine. She wept, pinned full-weight to the earth, known in the brain and known in the flesh and planted like dirt. (95)

Pauline's speaks from the dark, mysterious regions of female desire, that which has been long repressed, shut off, denied and marginalized by patriarchal culture. Seen as diffuse and dangerous by society it is locked up into the institution of marriage. Erdrich's novels are teeming with the power of female erotic pleasure, at the margins, in the subtext, in the gaps. It is diffuse and multiple in its manifestations and without end, creating its own inner space, vast and unknowable.

Near the end of Pauline's narration she rows out into the middle of Lake Matchimanito in one of her zealous religious moods, looking for a sign from god. It is a cold, wintry day and the lake is not calm enough for the old row boat she is using. A group gathers on the shore to watch while Nanapush rows out in an attempt to retrieve her, but Pauline is intractable. He returns to the shore, leaving her alone on the wide empty lake. From her vantage point in the middle of the lake, Pauline looks at the group gathered upon the shore—Nanapush, Margaret, Eli, Fleur, Bernadette—and thinks of them as "the kingdom of the damned" (199). They are all reaching out to her, calling her back to shore. Her self-willed exile makes her doubly marginalized, alienated from the alienated. Nanapush calls out to Pauline to "look to shore," implying, I assume, that there are people there who care for her, that though she feels alienated, she is not alone in her alienation. Perhaps the identity of this group of people has disappeared or become obscured, but their existence is all the more powerful; they are cast to the margins but certainly not annihilated. Though so many of the characters seem broken and dispirited, passive and without volition, they have, nevertheless, a strong will to endure, and several of them know that survival depends on whatever community they can forge.

Erdrich's readers are never lulled into identification with any of the characters, as the constant displacement of narrating consciousnesses prevents that. Thus the reader herself experiences a marginalization. Other critics have noted Erdrich's effect of marginalizing the reader: Catherine Rainwater in "Reading between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich" argues that Erdrich creates in the reader the experience of marginalization by employing conflicting narrative codes (a Western, Christian framework against an Eastern, Shamanic code), thus suspending the reader in a void between the codes. As some of the characters remain paralyzed and ineffectual

between these two contradictory systems of belief, the reader too remains at a hermeneutical impasse between two interpretive codes. Rainwater finds this conflict of codes frustrates narrativity, and the sense of frustration induced in the reader "amounts to... [an] encoded experience of marginality," and in producing this effect on the reader Erdrich underscores the theme of marginality (406). Suspension between narrative codes produces the feeling of marginalization. Rainwater's argument borrows from the semiotic theories of Michel Riffaterre, Umberto Eco, Robert Scholes, and Roland Barthes. Rainwater implies a balance of power between the text and the reader, that is a dynamic interaction whereas the text offers competing paradigms (Western and non-Western) and calls for a reader who can extend codes appropriate to each paradigm. There is an interaction between the reader and the text (the reader works her way through gaps and indeterminacies, shifts in perspectives, contradictions in paradigms), and in the course of this interaction, the reader at once creates two texts, two divergent readings, and experiences feelings of marginalization.

I agree with Rainwater's assertions about the evoked feelings of marginality. Erdrich's novels have the effect of marginalizing the reader but also freeing and empowering her. Erdrich's reader able to recognize that radically different perspectives and understandings do not create an atmosphere of anarchic insecurity but rather create an empowered reader who does not simply seek to actualize the meaning of the text, but rather is free to call it into question. The center can only be prioritized if there exists the oppositional relation of center to margin. Erdrich's calling attention to the margin paradoxically undoes its status as marginal; to call attention to the margin subsequently disregards and undermines the center, de-centers the center in a general upsetting of oppositional hierarchies. This idea is very similar to a train of thought in social psychology about the necessity of marginality to define the center. Deviant behavior helps to define the norm. Society needs to identify and label various aberrational or deviant behaviors in order to establish an idea of normal.

Erdrich's decision to focus on what has been traditionally cast aside - marginal characters - puts her in a tradition of marginalized writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Maxine

Hong Kingston. I think that the upsetting of hierarchies is all the more pressing to women minority writers because they experience marginalization with greater intensity than their male counterparts, for their status as women leaves them chronically marginalized. There is no dream of returning to a homeland; women everywhere, at all times, are excluded from the dominant culture and dominant discursive practices. Erdrich's aesthetic thus is one of subversion, for to carve out an artistic identity in a system of representation that is not of your own making invariably leads one to subversive practices (metafiction, gender deconstruction, antilinearity, magical realism, inversion of the center/margin dichotomy), practices that call into question and undermine privileged paradigms and values, opening up room for competing paradigms and value systems, enlarging and enriching our understanding of the human experience.

NOTES

[1] Lamont, Rosette C., "Off-Center Spatiality," in Theory and Practice of Feminist Literary Criticism, (eds.) Mora, Gabriela and Karen S. Van Hoalt (Ypsilanti, Michigan: Eastern Michigan Press, 1982). Lamont's article was very helpful and provided me with a starting point for this chapter. In this article she focuses on Marguerite Duras and Elizabeth Hardwick.

[2] Cixous, Helene. "Castration or Decapitation?" Signs. vol.7, no.1, 1981. Annette Kuhn, Trans. In this essay Cixous takes patriarchal culture to task for defining woman as "other." She argues that if society is structured by male fear of castration, it is also structured by female fear of decapitation, i.e., the thwarting of female desire, the silencing of women.

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