Reading
Louise Erdrich's
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by P. Jane Hafen
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The writings of Louise Erdrich not only reflect their author’s multilayered, complex background but they also confound a variety of literary genre and cultural categories. Although Erdrich is known primarily as a successful contemporary Native American writer, her finely polished writing reveals both her Turtle Mountain Chippewa and Euroamerican heritages. Nevertheless, her diverse imageries, subjects, and textual strategies reaffirm imperatives of American Indian survival. She prescribes the literary challenge for herself and other contemporary Native writers in her essay “Where I Ought to Be: A Writer’s Sense of Place”: “In the light of enormous loss, [contemporary Native writers] must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of the catastrophe” (1). Standing at the center of her work is the acclaimed novel, *Love Medicine* (1984, revised and expanded 1993). Subsequent novels return to the themes, characters, and places established in *Love Medicine* and create an epic tale of survival among Ojibwe Indians in the northern plains.

The compelling purposes of Erdrich’s writing, survival and celebration, also apply to criticisms about that writing. Critics of Native American literature must consider how the literature reflects living cultures, survivors, tribal nationality, and sovereignty. When a literary scholar makes an error or poor assumption about Shakespeare or Mark Twain or Wallace Stegner, that scholar is
Reading *Love Medicine* in this way, then, shares Erdrich’s imperatives of survival and celebration, of connection to Ojibwe-specific culture and place on the northern plains. Erdrich reveals these ideals with lyric and compelling storytelling.
American Indians have been a constant in the west and in western literature. The range of portrayal has been from James Fenimore Cooper’s Noble Savages and identification with wilderness to their invisibility in the writings of Stegner and Willa Cather. They have been sources and objects of violence, romance, and imagination. Contemporary writers like Tony Hillerman and Brady Udall continue to construct Indians as a source for literature set in the American west. Yet as early as Sarah Winnemucca’s 1881 account of the white man’s 1847 entry into Northern Paiute lands, native peoples have told their own experiences in the west. Those experiences, even when rendered in fiction, are considerably different than the imaginary interpretations by non-Native authors.

Indigenous literary traditions pre-date European and Euroamerican encounters. Oral in nature, each tribe has a sophisticated system of creation stories and records of history. Inevitably these literatures connect Indian peoples to their particular tribal places. Erdrich comes out of this tradition and observes,

In a tribal view of the world, where one place has been inhabited for generations, the landscape becomes enlivened by a sense of group and family history. Unlike most contemporary writers, a traditional storyteller fixes listeners in an unchanging landscape combined of myth and reality. People and place are inseparable. (“Where I Ought to Be” 1)

Erdrich’s place is the northern plains of the midwest. Her stories of indigenous peoples play with historical images of Indians in literature, but they also speak with a powerful voice of the complexities of American Indian experiences.

The Ojibwe people historically refer to themselves as Anishinabe. The English speakers of the United States mangled their name into “Chippewa,” and that is the legal designation recognized by
the federal government. The Ojibwe consist of about a hundred bands and reservation communities in what is now Canada and the United States. They have commonalities among traditions, histories, and most importantly geographic place, the North American west. Imposition of political divisions after European contact and conflicts with traditional enemies, the Dakota and the Mesquakie, forced the Ojibwe into discrete communities and diminished their collective power, but did not reduce a general communal sense of identity. Western bands of the Ojibwe settled in the Pembina area and the “Turtle Mountains of the Dakota border region” (Tanner 439). Consequently, these bands, including Erdrich’s home tribe, adopted northern plains traditions into their woodland cultural way of life. (See Tanner for a discussion of plains and woodland traditions.)

Karen Louise Erdrich was born 7 June 1954 in Little Falls, Minnesota, into a lineage of storytellers and survivors. Her mother, Rita Joanne Gourneau Erdrich, was the daughter of Turtle Mountain Chippewa tribal chair, Pat Gourneau. Both her mother and her father, Ralph Erdrich, were teachers at the Indian school in Wahpeton, North Dakota, where Erdrich grew up. Mary Korll, her paternal grandmother, was of German descent and ran a butcher shop much as Mary Adare does in The Beet Queen (1986). Her parents’ commitment to education led Erdrich to the first coeducational class at Dartmouth, where she won her first poetry prize and graduated in 1976. Also at Dartmouth, Erdrich first met Michael Dorris (Modoc, 1945-1997), then a professor in American Indian Studies. After various jobs teaching poetry, earning a master’s degree from Johns Hopkins, and editing a Boston Indian Council newspaper, Erdrich returned to Dartmouth in 1981 as writer-in-residence.

In October 1981 Erdrich married Dorris and they began what would be a stellar literary union with a tragic end. Prior to the
marriage, Dorris had adopted three Indian children from the Sioux Nation. After their union, Erdrich also adopted the children, and the couple would later have three children of their own.

Dorris’s editorial suggestions and input helped launch Erdrich’s career and led to his own literary pursuits. Their extensive writing collaboration was so close that the couple agreed on every word. Their literary partnership went uncredited until the novel The Crown of Columbus (1991) and the collection of travel essays Route Two (1991). Each of their own books has a loving dedication to the other person: “To Michael—Complice in every word, essential as air” (The Beet Queen) and “For Louise—Who found the song and gave me the voice” (Cloud Chamber, 1997).


Dorris chronicled the difficult life of their oldest child, Adam, and his struggles with fetal alcohol syndrome in The Broken Cord. Although the book was highly praised for its compelling tragedy, it
also received strong criticism for its harsh condemnation of drinking mothers. Erdrich confessed in the foreword to this nonfiction prose account, “[L]ove is inextricable from anger” (xvi). When as an adult Adam was struck and killed by a car in 1991, Dorris’s depressive tendencies escalated. The strain on the marriage intensified when another child was arrested in 1993 for attempting to extort money from the couple. Erdrich and Dorris separated in 1995. In 1997 Dorris committed suicide.

In 1982 Erdrich made an impressive literary debut with “The World’s Greatest Fisherman,” a short story that won the Nelson Algren Award. She submitted the story at Dorris’s urging, writing and revising in a “barricaded” kitchen while Dorris, incapacitated with a bad back, encouraged her from the floor. The next year her story “Scales,” which incorporated her own job experience at a highway weigh station, was selected for The Best American Short Stories, 1983. “Saint Marie,” published in The Atlantic Monthly (March 1984), won an O. Henry Award in 1985. All three stories would become chapters in Erdrich’s stunning inaugural book, Love Medicine. The book received numerous honors including the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Award for Fiction, the Sue Kaufman Prize for Best First Fiction, and the Virginia McCormick Scully Prize for the best book of 1984 dealing with Indians or Chicanos. Although usually classified as a novel because of recurring characters and development, Love Medicine challenges the definition with independent nonlinear and multiple-voiced narratives. Erdrich expands the genre further with subsequent volumes that continue the story, themes, and characters: The Beet Queen, Tracks (1988), the revised edition of Love Medicine (1993), The Bingo Palace (1994), Tales of Burning Love (1996), and The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse (2001).
In 1984, the same year as Love Medicine, Erdrich published Jacklight, her first collection of poems. Most of the poems had been written in the late 1970s and without Dorris's collaborative assistance. The volume was generally well-received and planted the seeds of Erdrich's later themes of "Abandonment and return. Pleasure and denial. Failure. Absurdity" (Chavkin and Chavkin 228). The return is to tribal roots, place, and community, and returnees include such characters as the lost Ojibwe woman "Walking in the Breakdown Lane" or the students in "Indian Boarding School: The Runaways," which won the Pushcart Prize in 1983. In the latter poem, the escapees are running toward home, instead of away from it. One poem from Jacklight, "A Love Medicine," foreshadows the elements that will be developed into the novel. Erdrich describes a flood on the Red River concurrent with an instance of domestic violence: "at the crest of the flood, / when the pilings are jarred from their sockets / and pitch into the current, / she steps against the fistwork of a man" (7). The speaker of the poem wants to intervene for her sister. The "love medicine" of the poem is the healing required for survival: "We see that now the moon is leavened and the water, / as deep as it will go, / stops rising. Where we wait for the night to take us / the rain ceases. Sister, there is nothing / I would not do" (8). Erdrich has said of this poem, "I was sort of making that poem up as a love medicine, as a sort of healing love poem. So, I suppose there are all kinds of love and ways to use poetry and that was what I tried to do with it" (Chavkin and Chavkin 100). The metaphor would be extended in the novel Love Medicine.

After Jacklight, Erdrich claimed she would no longer publish poetry because the medium was too personal. Yet in 1989, after The Beet Queen and Tracks, she published a second volume, Baptism of Desire. Erdrich admits, "[M]ost [ . . . ] poems in this
book were written between the hours of two and four in the morning, a period of insomnia brought on by pregnancy” (48).

In anticipation of the Columbus Quincentenary, Erdrich and Dorris received an advance, reportedly more than one million dollars, to write The Crown of Columbus. Principally narrated by Dartmouth professors, Vivian Twostar, a Navajo/Coeur d’Alene, and Roger Williams, Puritan in heritage and spirit, the novel is a balancing of polar opposites, including American east versus west. Both narrators search for the “truth” about Columbus. Vivian wishes to tell the story from a Native perspective; Roger wishes to heroicize Columbus in an epic poem. Their quests lead to love, a child, and a mystery plot that is resolved by a startling discovery.

Dorris originally conceived the character of the female professor, who, although he denied its autobiographical roots, shares such personal similarities with Dorris as being an Indian academic and a mixed blood. Vivian says, “I belong to the lost tribe of mixed bloods, that hodge-podge amalgam of hue and cry that defies easy placement. […] ‘Caught between two worlds,’ is the way we’re often characterized, but I’d put it differently. We are the catch” (123-24). While Erdrich stated that she researched the diaries of Columbus for the historical details in the plot, neither would take credit for specific passages, declaring that the novel was a complete collaboration. The crying infant, Violet, whose voice inhabits the novel’s background, was not unlike their own squalling child during the writing of the book. Together Erdrich and Dorris created characters who cross the boundaries of race, gender, religions, histories, and cultures to find their own human treasure.

Although The Crown of Columbus was widely criticized in reviews for its adventure plot and less than literary language, it became a bestseller. Such criticism generally overlooks the novel’s subtleties about urban professional Indians as well as the bold
gesture of having Roger recite his epic Columbus poem at the novel’s climax.

In The Blue Jay’s Dance: A Birth Year (1995), Erdrich continued to reveal intimate aspects of her life and marriage. In this well-received memoir she details how she juggles her various responsibilities as wife, mother, and writer, and how those roles overlap. As she describes her writing process, she observes with poignancy and in the lyrical detail of her fiction the natural world around her. Although this is a self-revealing narrative with private details, such as Dorris’s thick hair and an intense range of emotional responses to a colicky baby, Erdrich preserves the anonymity of her three daughters by combining their identity into one representative infant and never naming them. Lovingly written, the book echoes her fictive themes of survival and continuity and spans generations through recollections of Erdrich’s grandparents.

Just as The Blue Jay’s Dance is a cyclical telling of Erdrich’s life with her infants, so the North Dakota cycle of novels is a fictive telling of twentieth-century Ojibwe life. Epic in scope, Love Medicine, The Beet Queen, Tracks, The Bingo Palace, Tales of Burning Love, and The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse continue characters and themes yet shift in narrative styles, overlap chronologically, and present a holistic view of modern American Indian experiences. While some characters are unforgettable, a lack of emphasis on a singular hero or heroine, together with the multiple narrators, establishes the tribal and communal voice as the protagonist in the series. These books, according to Thomas Disch, create “a North Dakota of the imagination that, like Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, unites the archetypal and the arcane, heartland America and borderline schizophrenia” (1). This inextricable connection between identity and place, in this case the American west, permeates these novels in both the Native and non-Native characters.
Although published third in the sequence, *Tracks* was conceived first and begins the saga of tribal endurance by chronicling events from 1912 through 1924. The harrowing story of land loss and cultural negotiation is placed around Matchimanito Lake with one chapter about Fleur’s displacement in the town of Argus, North Dakota. The narration unfolds alternately between Nanapush, a characterization of the Ojibwe trickster, *Nanabozho*, and Pauline Puyat. Both are consummate storytellers: Nanapush focuses on tribal strength and survival and directs his narrative toward Lulu, who inherits his name and spirit if not his genes; Pauline, however, is desperately trying to escape her mixed blood and cultural confusion. Neither is a reliable narrator, and each underscores the transmutability of perception and truth. Without her own narrative voice, but nonetheless a central presence, is the mythic Fleur, who repeatedly defies death. Published independently, the second chapter, “Fleur,” won the O. Henry First Place Prize in 1987. Despite *Tracks*’ seemingly tragic denouement with loss of life, land, and place, the novel is a compelling story of Ojibwe survival.

*The Beet Queen* returns to the small town of Argus, North Dakota, and jumps ahead to events occurring between 1932 and 1972. In addition to several first-person narrators, Erdrich includes a third-person omniscient narrator to clarify and summarize. The novel begins and ends with airplanes as images of escape. In an early episode, Adelaide flies away with a barnstorming pilot, abandoning her three children, Karl and Mary Adare and their infant brother. The novel concludes with Adelaide’s granddaughter, Dot, flying and being tempted by the same escape, yet returning to the familiar comfort of Argus.

The community of characters is an array of displaced non-Indian and Ojibwe individuals without binding tribal traditions. All are off-center, or as Gretchen Bataille suggests, literary grotesques: Ojibwes Russell Kashpaw and Celestine James are separated by
race; Sita Kozka is psychotic; her cousin Mary Adare is obsessed with spiritualism and visually notable because of her squat physique. Mary’s brother Karl is bisexual and, with Celestine, fathers Wallacette, also known as “Dot.” Beet baron Wallace Pfef is a closet homosexual who acts paternally toward Dot. Mary and Karl were abandoned as children, and Russell is confined to a wheelchair. Because no adult character is “normal” and no “stable” traditional family structure exists, Erdrich extends the bounds of acceptability to the whole community, creating an environment of diversity that allows the characters to bond with one another despite traditional prejudices and barriers. Unity amidst such diversity is furthered by their collective and individual interest in Dot.

Although The Beet Queen was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award, Erdrich received harsh personal criticism from renowned Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko. Silko complained that the novel and Erdrich were not Indian enough and called the book a “strange artifact” that belonged on the shelf with fairy tales. Gerald Vizenor, White Earth Chippewa critic and author, defended Erdrich’s style and content as postmodern. Erdrich graciously excused Silko for not reading the book carefully and for assuming that the German and Polish characters were Indians. Despite the number of non-Indian characters, the book centers in the mixed bloods Celestine and Dot. Erdrich manages to capture a range of human emotions while simultaneously informing the characters of their Ojibwe heritage of history, survival, and community.

Published first, Love Medicine is the most complex of the North Dakota novels. Though the opening chapter sets the time as 1981, the narratives circle back to 1934 and return to 1984. These are stories of contemporary reservation life with its grim realities and joys: alcoholism, suicide, abandoned children, disrupted
relationships, yet continuity in extended families, new life, escapes, and humor. The love medicine of the title heals and offers hope and forgiveness for this community of Ojibwe survivors.

Erdrich establishes in this first novel narrative techniques to which she will return in the subsequent books. As in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930), multiple narrators tell their stories, yet with Erdrich’s dexterity, each voice remains distinct. Rather than emphasizing individualistic quests, the solo voices create a chorus of tribal storytelling. Three of the principal characters, Marie Lazarre, Nector Kashpaw, and Lulu Lamartine originated in *Tracks*, and as their adult lives intertwine in *Love Medicine*, they create ties to the future.

Erdrich expands the theme of healing and reconciliation begun in the poem “Love Medicine.” The characters are modern Ojibwe who mediate their traditional and historical backgrounds with the challenges and cultural images of the modern world. The key to personal and cultural survival rests in the ability to heal, to forgive, and to mediate the outside forces that would assimilate and destroy the Ojibwes.

The Ojibwe framework of *Love Medicine* is the object of numerous critical articles addressing Native American values and often lamenting the supposed disappearance of authentic Indian culture and peoples. However, little has been published about how these indigenous values are adapted in the modern world of mediated cultures or how Euroamerican reconciliations reject complete assimilation and allow reassertion of tribal identity. *Love Medicine* recreates a nonlinear temporal world that is informed by the past yet accommodates present realities for future survival. Inasmuch as the novel is presented in a nonlinear fashion, this reading will follow that pattern and discuss each chapter sequentially, then consider *Love Medicine* in the larger context of Erdrich’s work.

Even before the narrative begins, the “Table of Contents” reveals the complex world of colonized yet persistent Ojibwe Indians.
Many chapter titles appear to have a Christian or specifically Roman Catholic subtext. These include “The Greatest Fisherman in the World,” “Saint Marie,” “The Beads,” “Flesh and Blood,” “The Red Convertible,” “Crown of Thorns,” “Resurrection,” “The Good Tears,” and “Crossing the Water.” Though the reader encounters these seemingly Catholic images, the Ojibwe point of view soon becomes apparent as the images often can be interpreted in both contexts.

The novel begins with the 1981 journey of June Morrissey Kashpaw, a woman who has lost her way in the world and is trying to get home to the reservation. Although June dies by page six, her spirit inhabits the novel, and the other characters are healed by finding and telling of their love for her. Again, in the tribal tradition of storytelling and orality, various characters and an omniscient, non-intrusive narrator report the novel. It begins,

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

The precise references to time—day, hour, and its death—seem estranged from mythic and circular time and symbolize the dominant culture’s influence on June. However, the presentation of the chapters of the novel moves forward and backward in time, with Erdrich’s characteristic narrative overlapping. The reader could begin the novel at any chapter, and the final paragraphs compel a return to the beginning.

June’s quest to return home is a thwarted effort to return to the tribal values associated with nonlinear time and to place/home. Her Ojibwe/Chippewa tribal affiliation is revealed naturally in the
narrative and contrasts her history to her more recent circumstances. The description poetically encapsulates the conflicting forces of her life. The Easter reference alludes to her resurrective existence as the many characters of the novel reconcile their personal relationship with her and address their own inner conflicts.

“The Greatest Fisherman in the World” is a word play on the inscription given to Jesus Christ and on the hat King Kashpaw wears. Eli Kashpaw, one of the most traditional Ojibwes in the novel, assumes the phrase is literal and asserts that King could never be the hunter or fisherman that Eli is.

This beginning chapter introduces a large cast of characters, including Lulu, Eli, Nector, and Marie from Tracks. Later chapters will add Pauline/Sister Leopolda and Margaret Kashpaw/Rushes Bear from Tracks and Dot from The Beet Queen. A new generation of children and grandchildren validate the choices of survival made in Tracks. These characters in Love Medicine must face their own cultural choices in an increasingly complex universe. Not all individuals survive—in the opening pages, June is the first to succumb—but the tribal community works toward reconciliation. In “The Greatest Fisherman in the World,” June’s death brings together family and community with their histories, disputes, and issues.

After the initial episode of June’s death in the freezing Easter snow on the Great Plains, Albertine Johnson narrates the remainder of the chapter. Her affection for June contributes to a pattern where maternal extended family and tribal members influence younger generations. Albertine’s anger at her mother for not telling her about June’s funeral leads to a rift, but, like June, Albertine is still drawn home.

Through standard literary elements of setting, characterization, plot, and language, Erdrich introduces and melds American Indian issues. For Albertine, “Home” is “the very edge of the reservation”
on “land [her] great-grandparents were allotted when the government decided to turn Indians into farmers” (12). Land allotments were part of federal policy created by the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 and were a concerted effort by the government to assimilate Native peoples by turning Indians into individual property owners and disrupting their communal sense. That in 1981 Albertine can make this observation attests to the perseverance of indigenous peoples. Albertine characterizes her Grandma Kashpaw, Marie, as petite, “the same size to me as the old cairns commemorating Indian defeats around here” (16), thus connecting her to western place and history.

Another contemporary American Indian issue in this chapter is the complication of identity. Albertine is mixed blood. Her father is a Swede. She says, “I was light, clearly a breed” (24). Although Crow Creek Sioux scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn criticizes Erdrich’s mixed-blood narratives, the reality is that “blood quantum” can be a divisive issue among Indian peoples. Established as a criterion by the federal government in the enforcement of nineteenth-century treaty rights, blood quantum based on fractionization (full-blood, half-blood, quarter-blood, etc.) has been the defining factor of Indian identity. However, most contemporary tribes have defined their own qualifications for tribal membership, with some tribes relying on quantum, some on proof of descent, or others on ties to community and language. The cultural residue of blood quantum reflects a colonized mindset, and Albertine’s mother dismisses it in favor of culture and community: “My girl’s an Indian,” Zelda emphasized. ‘I raised her an Indian and that’s what she is’” (24). Not only does her mother affirm Albertine’s identity, she employs traditional nomenclature of “Indian” instead of the politically correct “Native American,” thus rooting Albertine in a world aware of the past on her mother’s terms.

In addition to June’s demise, “The Greatest Fisherman in the World” also begins with the image of fishing and capture, tying
the title of the chapter with the water imagery that unifies the novel. A man in the bar “hooked his arm, inviting [June] to enter and she did so without hesitation” (1). Later, Albertine describes her interaction with her senile grandfather, Nector Kashpaw: “His thoughts swam between us, hidden under rocks, disappearing in weeds, and I was fishing for them, dangling my own words like baits and lures” (19). The Ojibwe are a woodland culture whose materiality is located in the northern plains and Great Lakes. Traditional beliefs, deities, and stories also reflect watery origins.

The water metaphors are also immediately apparent. June sees the man in the bar “through the watery glass” (1). The blinding reflection of the snow is “like going under water” (2). Albertine describes Nector’s thoughts as “finned off and vanished. The same color as water” (19). As discussed later, the water is a pharmakos, an image that can both drown and offer baptismal rebirth. It is an important tie to place and Indian identity, both literally and figuratively. Not only does it recall a woodland tribal past, but it hints at the way traditional culture can drown or offer reconciliation.

Forgiveness and reconciliation, “love medicine,” appear as the family unites to remember June Morrissey. However, alcohol and jealousies interrupt. Lipsha Morrissey confides to Albertine that he does not believe he could ever forgive his mother for trying to drown him. She tries to show some understanding for his mother. The chapter ends with a pie fight that is both tragic and slapstick. Again, Albertine becomes the mediator as she tries to repair the damage:

I spooned the fillings back into the crusts, married slabs of dough, smoothed over edges of crusts with a wetted finger, fit crimps to crimps and even fluff to fluff on top of the berries or pudding. I worked carefully for over an hour. But once they smash there is no way to put them right. (42)
The incident illuminates the paradoxical nature of forgiveness, of trying to repair the irreparable. Even though the pies cannot be repaired, just as June’s life cannot be saved, the survivors must carry on. This threshold chapter is tightly unified by such images and events, and it also introduces these themes that will become apparent throughout Love Medicine.

“Saint Marie” takes the reader back to 1934. Grandma Kashpaw is the youthful Marie Lazarre, fourteen, who enters the convent with the intent of becoming a saint. She appears to deny her Indianness: “[the black robe women] were not any lighter than me. I was going up there to pray as good as they could. Because I don’t have that much Indian blood. And they never thought they’d have a girl from this reservation as a saint they’d have to kneel to” (43). Although Marie might appear to be rejecting her Ojibwe identity, she is reclaiming it by declaring that the nuns could and would worship an Indian girl.

Once Marie enters the convent a battle between good and evil emerges, but the moral lines are blurred. Marie recognizes that Sister Leopolda is the only nun who has not “given up on Satan” (45). By acknowledging Satan’s existence, Sister Leopolda (Pauline Puyat) defaults to an Ojibwe world view that does not try to eradicate evil but acknowledges its existence. Marie recognizes that Sister Leopolda “knew as much about [Satan] as my grandma, who called him by other names and was not afraid” (45). Sister Leopolda is determined to drive Satan out of Marie, and that also means overcoming the physical bonds of the flesh. She beans Marie with a pole and scalds her in the name of love. She racially attacks Marie, yet Marie is drawn to her: “You have two choices. One, you can marry a no-good Indian, bear his brats, die like a dog. Or two, you can give yourself up to God.” To which Marie responds,
I could have had any damn man on the reservation at the time. And I could have made him treat me like his own life. I looked good. And I looked white. But I wanted Sister Leopolda’s heart. And here was the thing: sometimes I wanted her heart in love and admiration. Sometimes. And sometimes I wanted her heart to roast on a black stick.

(48-49)

Their relationship is a complex power struggle that would seem to polarize good and evil, Indian and non-Indian, faith and pragmatism. Rather than oppositions in conflict, the complexities reconcile toward survival. The title of the chapter, “Saint Marie,” reverberates Marie’s innocence, even though her motives may be self-aggrandizing. What Marie does not know is that Sister Leopolda is her mother, Pauline Puyat, and that, as Pauline, she emotionally denied the pregnancy and birth in order to be purified. If the reader is not familiar with Tracks, s/he will not have this knowledge either.

In the convent, Sister Leopolda’s sadistic treatment of Marie Lazarre is a critique of the dominance and harsh racism of the Catholic Church. Yet the Church, despite all the satire of mysticism and self-mortification, becomes mediator for the relationship between the two characters; it becomes the only arena where Marie has contact with her mother/nun. Marie lives in both worlds of Catholicism and tribal unity, later adopting and rearing foundlings of the tribe, including June and Lipsha.

The resolution of this chapter is marked by the power of secrets and knowledge, by deception and complicity. In a physical struggle that echoes Leopolda/Pauline’s resistance to giving birth to Marie, Marie tries to shove Leopolda in the oven. Leopolda retaliates by stabbing Marie in the hand and by knocking her out. When Marie comes to, she realizes that Sister Leopolda has cleverly concocted an excuse for the wounds and ascribes them to the stigmata. Even
at such a young age, Marie knows to play along with the ruse. Her heart changes from triumph to pity. She understands that healing and forgiveness are necessary for her to carry on, and they must be sincere and complete: “I had already smiled in a saint’s mealy forgiveness. I heard myself speaking gently. ‘Receive the dispensation of my sacred blood,’ I whispered. But there was no heart in it. No joy when she bent to touch the floor. No dark leaping” (60).

The larger rhetorical context is a critique of Catholicism and the extreme punishments Sister Leopolda practices under the authority of religion. She would even exploit the stigmata to obscure her own cruelty. Marie colludes with deception. However, just as she will later continue to practice Catholicism, Marie’s declaration indicates that her understanding, through a world view inculcated from early on, is of a moral imperative—of love, charity, and forgiveness—greater than the institution of the church. That ability to resist and survive the moral ambiguity of a religious institution may not be an overt representation of Ojibwe nationality; however, Marie’s response shows that her ethics have already been defined.

Marie’s maturity is apparent in the chapter that immediately follows, “Wild Geese.” Narrated by Nector Kashpaw, its 1934 events are concurrent with the action of “Saint Marie.” As Nector is delivering a pair of geese to the convent and reflecting on his attraction to Lulu Nanapush, he runs headlong into Marie, who is running away from her encounter with Sister Leopolda. After some verbal and physical banter, their confrontation turns sexual. The dynamics could appear ruthless. He overpowers her; he thinks less of her for her whiteness and for her family background. Yet, when he learns of the fresh wound to her hand, he finds an attraction to her strengths. Despite her injury she had not cried out. The short chapter concludes with Nector’s thoughts: “The sun falls down the side of the world and the hill goes dark. Her hand grows thick and fevered, heavy in my own, and I don’t want her but I want her,
and I cannot let go” (67). He foreshadows the attractions he will have throughout his life as he is pulled between his commitment to Marie and his desire for Lulu. The title, referring to the wild geese who mate for life, also foreshadows events in the “Love Medicine” chapter.

This episode occurs on a slope, outside the structure but in the shadow of the convent. Both Marie and Nector consider that their encounter may have been witnessed by those in the convent. Nector panics, but Marie acts with assurance. Although the references to land and place are subtle—beginning with Nector hunting in the slough, and ending with “the sun fall[ing] down the side of the world” (67)—nevertheless, when combined with the image of the wild geese, these images suggest the natural elements of the reservation setting.

“The Island” is a chapter that was first published in the 1993 edition. Unlike previous chapters it is undated, but events place it after the 1934 date of the previous chapters. Lulu Nanapush narrates the chapter and appears as a young woman, older than the child of Tracks and younger than Nector’s lover. As she recalls her boarding school experience and missing her mother, what she longs for most is “the old language in my mother’s mouth” (68). Erdrich has Lulu continue: “Sometimes, I heard her. N’dawnis, n’dawnis. My daughter, she consoled me. Her voice came from all directions, mysteriously keeping me from inner harm. Her voice was the struck match. Her voice was the steady flame” (69). By introducing Ojibwe language, Erdrich affirms tribal nationality. Although the following sentence demonstrates the complication of orality and literacy—“But it was my old uncle Nanapush who wrote the letters that brought me home”—Lulu is privileging the heart of what shapes her world in her mother’s tongue. “The Island” likewise cements tradition, language, and place in Ojibwe culture. The chapter could actually begin where Tracks ends. Lulu
returns to the reservation from boarding school and lives with Nanapush and Rushes Bear, or Margaret Kashpaw. Together they ridicule Nector’s choice of Marie Lazarre, referring to her family as “pale as dough” and Marie as “[w]hite as a fish!” Again the internal politics of skin tone and tribal identity are manifest. Nanapush wisely counsels Lulu, “Jealousy will tear you up” (72). Later in life Lulu will become involved with Nector; the healing advised by Nanapush, though, leads to another and crucial relationship in Lulu’s life.

Moses Pillager is a character in *Love Medicine* deeply steeped in Ojibwe tradition. Living alone on the island in Matchimanito Lake, he wears the skins of cats, an incarnation of an Ojibwe trickster. Later descriptions of Lulu also will give her catlike characteristics as she continues the sacred trickster tradition derived from her spiritual father, Nanapush, his name a version of *Nanabozho*, the primary Ojibwe trickster, and from the influence of Moses Pillager. She flaunts convention, bearing eight sons by different fathers: “The three oldest were Nanapushes. The next oldest were Morrisseys who took the name Lamartine, and then there were more assorted younger Lamartines who didn’t look like one another, either” (109). Her excesses bring about disaster, including the burning of her home and a seemingly unstable life with many sorrows. Nevertheless, in her pluralistic universe, intemperances also invoke justice. The tribe compensates her for her house after she threatens to name the fathers of her sons.

Her trickster legacy of sexual indiscretion is continued by her sons. She mitigates illegitimacy by guiding her grandson, Lipsha Morrissey, to his realization about himself: “You never knew who you were. That’s one reason why I told you. I thought it was a knowledge that could make or break you” (337). As with trickster, the sin or moral infraction is not in doing but in not knowing. Trickster’s outrageous behavior establishes a moral responsibility
of accepting consequences for one’s behavior. As Lulu observes: “Right and wrong were shades of meaning, not sides of a coin” (76).

Lulu’s sojourn with Moses on the island introduces two additional important tribal elements. The first is the relationship between men and women where women have strength and power. Their power is derived from more than sexuality. As Lulu learns from Rushes Bear, “[T]he woman is complete. Men must come through us to live” (82). Women in Love Medicine and the other Erdrich novels are strong and powerful because Ojibwe culture constructs gender complementarily; that is, women can act independently and have power within the tribal community, and, like Lulu, they are often self-sufficient.

The second aspect of tribal assertion is in Moses’ name. Nanapush relates that Moses’ mother hid his real name so the spirits of death would not claim him. Even Lulu will not reveal his name: “I hold his name close as my own blood and I will never let it out. I only spoke it that once so he would know he was alive” (82). The power of naming reflects on the relationship between indigenous peoples. Tribal nations became known by names the government was determined to call them, like Chippewa instead of Ojibwe. Individuals were forced to adopt Christian names like “Moses.” That Erdrich does not have Lulu reveal his Ojibwe name allows him to keep the intrinsic tribal strength of that name.

Next, Marie Lazarre Kashpaw narrates “The Beads,” which is set in 1948. The title is suggestive of rosary beads, but beads are also a traditional emblem, in this case from the Cree who wanted to ward off spirits from June, whom they had found in the wilderness. Marie takes in June Morrissey and, though times are difficult, keeps her because “the girl had survived—by eating pine sap in the woods” (85). Marie recognizes a fortitude and will to survive in June. Even after June survives abandonment, she also has to
put up with teasing and abuse from Marie and Nector’s other children. Marie’s willingness to rescue June parallels her own rescue from her mother, Pauline Puyat. Bloodlines are less important than caring for the child. When Marie intervenes when her children are about to hang June, though, June calls Marie a “damn old bitch” (90). Marie punishes June and June does not complain, but then Marie glimpses June’s soul: “Brave as me, that was June. […] There was a sadness I couldn’t touch there. It was a hurt place, it was deep, it was with her all the time like a broke rib that stabbed when she breathed” (91). Like the fetal-alcohol-syndrome children Erdrich and Dorris describe in *The Broken Cord*, some children are damaged beyond the power of love to heal. Marie also takes in her brother-in-law, Eli, who helps the family while Nector is off gambling and drinking. The extended family situation reflects the tribal community and the need of these characters not to individuate selfishly or singularly but as part of a larger whole. Marie gives up June to the care of Eli, and the two return to the woods. The only thing June leaves are the beads.

The second part of the chapter is an addition in the 1993 version of *Love Medicine*. It continues the same principles as in the first part. This time Marie takes in her mother-in-law, Rushes Bear. Marie is pregnant and has to deal with Rushes Bear, who is belligerent, temperamental, and demanding. Yet when Marie’s labor begins, Rushes Bear defaults to what she knows, burning tobacco and sage, offering tea. With another assertion of Ojibwe tradition, Marie focuses on a word: *Babaumawaebigowin*. The word translates roughly as “I am driven by the waves as a high sea” (Baraga 61), and Marie describes her labor with water images: “I saw myself as from a distance, floating calm, driven by long swells of waves” (102).

With the birth of the baby, Marie reconciles the animosity she has felt toward her mother-in-law. Rushes Bear reprimands Nector
for not caring for his family and claims Marie as her own. Again, fidelity in relationships supercedes bloodlines as Marie observes:

I never saw this woman the same way I had before that day. Before that birth of the child, a son after all, Rushes Bear was a hot fire that I wanted to crush. After that, things were different. I never saw her without knowing that she was my own mother, my own blood. What she did went beyond the frailer connections. More than saving my life, she put the shape of it back in place. (104)

Rushes Bear literally helps Marie survive the birth, but more importantly she brings the family together to survive through healing and forgiveness. Though Rushes Bear wanders in the darkness of dementia in her final years and becomes child instead of mother to Marie, Marie lovingly sees the end of the journey: "She crested and sank in dark waves. Those waves were taking her onward, through night, through day, the water beating and slashing across her unknown path. She struggled to continue. She was traveling hard, and death was her light" (105). "The Beads" shows the various stages Marie experiences as a mother, daughter-in-law, wife, and caretaker. Through Marie, the family survives famine and hardship, and finds a healing to face the events beyond their control.

The next chapter, “Lulu’s Boys,” jumps ahead to 1957. Twists, wordplays, and ironies characterize Lulu and the events. One of Lulu’s husbands, Henry Lamartine, drunk, was killed when his car stalled or stopped on the railroad tracks. His intention is unclear. At the funeral, Lulu falls into the grave and is revived by her brother-in-law, Beverly “Hat” Lamartine. Nine months after the funeral, Henry Lamartine, Jr., is born, but Beverly believes the child is his. Seven years later (1957), Beverly schemes to take the boy with him to the Twin Cities in Minnesota. Erdrich exposes
some of the destructive ways Indians feel about themselves. Beverly thinks he would be offering Henry, Jr., opportunities and feels “those who thought of themselves as Indians quite backward” (109).

When Beverly returns, Lulu reminds him of a game of strip poker where she won and chose Henry over him. The gamesmanship and the “boldness” with which she discusses her marriage choice mark her trickster-like character. Once again, as on the day of Henry’s wake, she seduces Beverly. Beverly describes the encounter as “tasting his own miraculous continuance” (120).

“Lulu’s Boys” has double meaning by referring to her sons and her lovers. She uses the “sacred domain of her femininity” to exert power over men, yet her sons respect and obey her (120). Henry, Jr., will remain with his mother, thwarting Beverly’s intentions. The solace of sexual intimacy may be only a singular moment, but its very existence offers hope and sustenance when Beverly returns to mainstream society. In keeping with Erdrich’s sense of celebration, sexuality turns into a commemoration of survival and hope for the future. Lulu’s eight sons will carry on her legacy.

In another multifaceted play on image and transforming historic perceptions by modulating into the modern world, Erdrich renders a new comprehension of the Noble Savage. In “The Plunge of the Brave” chapter, set in 1957, Nector is the speaker. He is employed as an actor to play dying Indians in western movies and as a model for a painting of a western vista. With a backdrop of allusions and references to Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1850), which Erdrich uses as a paradigm of Western Civilization’s novelistic tradition, the Noble Savage is parodied and transformed. After posing for an artist, Nector has an epiphany: “Remember Custer’s saying? The only good Indian is a dead Indian? [. . .] When I saw that the greater world was only interested in my doom, I went home [. . .] I knew that Nector Kashpaw would fool the pitiful rich woman that
painted him and survive the raging water” (124). The described painting is a prime example of sentimentalism that romantically relegates the Native American to the absolute past of Noble Savagery and the pristine, mythologized west. Nector rejects that drowning in artistic domination and embraces another image of watery survival. He intones, “‘Call me Ishmael,’ I said sometimes, only to myself. For he survived the great white monster like I got out of the rich lady’s picture” (125). Nector survives the popular arts by going home to the place that defines him authentically through tribal affiliation and community. He rejects the artificial constructs the outside world attempts to impose upon him.

Later, Nector is unfaithful to his marriage and plans to leave Marie for Lulu but he accidentally burns Lulu’s house instead. Through his violence, weaknesses, and desires, he realizes he may be more like Melville’s Ahab, stating, “for now I see signs of the captain in myself” (108). Nector’s identification with archetypal characters, drawn not from Ojibwe cosmology but from the literary canon of Western Civilization, does not demonstrate acculturation but exposes multiplicity in his cultural heritage. Nector’s indignant outrage toward exploitation in the dominant culture drives him home to affiliate with the tribal community. Critic Thomas Matchie suggests that Nector’s comic/tragic duality recalls “a type of figure not uncommon in Melville” (481). Additionally, Nector’s metaphors and play with Moby-Dick function as connectors to the literature and readers of the dominant society, a literature most minorities are required to study. Yet Nector rejects those literary objectifications and celebrates his individuality and tribal consciousness.

Nector’s survival from mainstream culture parallels his marital infidelity and sets in motion a lifetime of personal conflicts and subsequent healings at the heart of the book. For five years Nector and Lulu have an affair, and they produce a son, Lyman
Lamartine. When Nector finally resolves to leave his wife, Marie, he leaves her a note under the sugar jar. He writes another note to Lulu, pledging to be “Yours till hell freezes over” (140). When he goes to deliver the letter, though, he has second thoughts, crumples the paper, accidentally lights it on fire, and burns down Lulu’s house.

As in the earlier parallel chapters, the narrator and point of view shift in “Flesh and Blood,” in this case from Nector to Marie. The chapter begins with Marie consumed by her domestic duties but distracted by news of Sister Leopolda’s impending demise. Accidentally scalding her hand, an injury reminiscent of her time in the convent, Marie takes her daughter to see the aged nun. However, she cloaks herself in pride, wearing her best dress, boasting to her daughter and the nun. Finally, the meeting disintegrates in a struggle over the spoon/poker Leopolda had used to wound Marie so many years before. Marie’s recognition and healing come when she acknowledges, “There was nothing I could do after hating her all these years” (158).

Marie returns home to discover Nector’s note. She expends her anger and hurt by peeling sacks of potatoes and cleaning the floor in her good purple dress. Her thoughts go back to the nun, and she realizes she hurts not for the wounded pride but for the love she has for Nector. She carefully places the note under the salt shaker. When their daughter brings Nector to the door, Marie says, “I did what I learned from the nun. I put my hand through what scared him. I held it out there for him. And when he took it with all the strength of his arms I pulled him in” (166). Marie’s capacity to love, heal, and forgive—to offer love medicine—leads to the survival and celebration of her marriage and family.

“A Bridge” jumps ahead to 1973 and switches emphasis of characters. Young Albertine is a runaway. As an Indian girl in a strange town, Fargo, she is drawn to an Indian man who turns out
to be Henry Lamartine, Jr. At this point he is a wounded survivor, a former prisoner of war. When they finally meet, they realize their tribal ties. They go to a bar and then a hotel. Henry starts to have flashbacks from Viet Nam. Their intercourse is not intimate but desperate and fearful. Figuratively, the “bridge” is a coming-of-age experience for Albertine into adulthood. The bridge also could be a metaphor for the space these characters cannot cross to each other. Also, Henry thinks of diving off a bridge, and in the next chapter, “The Red Convertible,” he will, as, like June, he cannot overcome his demons.

Lyman Lamartine, son of Lulu and Nector, tells of his brother’s descent, but he also reveals his heritage. He has Nector’s sense of tribal business and politics, as will be seen in “The Tomahawk Factory,” and he has his mother’s sense of survival. The brothers buy a red convertible together and take a road trip before Henry joins the army. Erdrich uses cars as emblems of identity. In a twist on the historic warrior pony, the automobile, sign of “advanced” technology, becomes a mode of deliverance. June hitchs a ride to get home but abandons the pickup and the casual sexual encounter, walking into the snow that will snuff out her life. Henry, Sr., stalls his car on the railroad tracks, ending his life. Lynette seeks refuge in the car that King violently attacks. Lulu seduces Nector in a car, but Marie entices him in the wilderness. Gordie Kashpaw’s reconciliation to the memory of June is mediated by the transforming deer he hits with his car while driving drunk. Lipsha and Gerry reconcile in a car on the run to the Canadian border. Restoring the red convertible offers some healing for Henry, but it is not enough for him to recover. Lyman drives the car into the river after witnessing Henry, Jr., drown himself, “the worst death for a Chippewa to experience. By all accounts, the drowned weren’t allowed into the next life but forced to wander forever, broken shoed, cold, sore, and ragged” (295). Lyman is
the survivor of these brothers. The chapter title, “The Red Convertible,” refers to the car, but also has double meaning in the idea of conversion or change. Henry tries to change by repairing the car, giving it a new life, but finally he cannot create a new life for himself. His walk into the water is not a baptism but a watery death. However, Henry’s death irrevocably alters Lyman, who reflects, “I could feel change coming onto me [. . .] I was not the same [. . .] that boy was gone” (298).

“Scales” jumps ahead to 1980 and returns to Albertine, but introduces two new characters: Dot Adare (from The Beet Queen) and Gerry Nanapush. Albertine tells that Dot and Gerry are expecting a child, miraculously conceived in the visiting room of a prison. Gerry, a fictional recreation of imprisoned activist Leonard Peltier (Turtle Mountain Chippewa-Sioux), inherited his mother Lulu’s trickster lineage and can mystically disappear “like a rabbit,” eluding pursuing authorities. The rabbit is an incarnation of Ojibwe trickster (Catt 76). Gerry is playful and legendary, the inspiration to storytelling and songs. In a discussion of the trickster archetype, Catherine Catt observes Gerry’s transforming power: “Gerry Nanapush is a model for survival and power—much as Trickster is; he adapts to any circumstance, changing form if necessary” (77). Although Gerry may be the most obvious transforming character, he does so in order to survive.

Gerry’s arrest and incarceration critique the justice system and its application to Indians. Although the narrative clearly suggests that Gerry was defending himself against a cowboy, no witnesses come to his defense; powwow time and cultural behaviors combine to condemn Gerry. His own belief in his innocence and in his ability to escape keeps him on the run from the law. In his fugitive status, he unbelievably eludes his captors, once hiding on a gravel truck that Dot weighs on the scales at her job. Like other chapter titles, “Scales” implies a variety of meanings. There are the literal
scales of the truck weighing station, but there are also the scales of a justice system that Gerry cannot escape. The verb, to scale, is the image of Gerry’s vanishing acts. There are scales of a fish that take the reader back to the title and water imagery of the first chapter.

“Crown of Thorns” makes perhaps the most direct reference to Christian suffering and expiation. In this chapter, June’s husband, Gordie Kashpaw, comes to terms with her death. Gordie starts to drink again, caressing the bottle, trying to purge his hands of the intimate memory of June, of both his love for her and of his violence toward her. In drunken desperation, he takes off in his car. He hits a deer. Consumed with guilt, he stops and puts the deer in the back seat of his car. He continues his drunken journey only to be shocked by the gaze of the no-longer-stunned deer in his rearview mirror. Gordie strikes the deer with a crowbar, believing he kills her yet again. In his intoxicated miscomprehension, aided by ambiguities in the narrative voice, he envisions the deer as June: “Her look was black and endless and melting pure. She looked through him. She saw into the troubled thrashing woods of him, a rattling thicket of bones. She saw how he’d woven his own crown of thorns” (221). He drives to the Catholic mission to confess his crime, the murder of his wife, to an insomniac, clarinet-playing nun.

This episode, like others in Love Medicine, heals through humor, through transformation with the car as medium. Gordie’s pain and shock about the deer lead to ritualized mourning over June’s real death. Gordie runs, “crying like a drowned person, howling in the open fields” (229). His primal scream also indicates the duality of water imagery. For Gordie, as for Henry, Jr., and Lyman, water is a pharmakos that represents both drowning and baptismal rebirth. His alcoholism is a heritage of catastrophe he cannot overcome, as will be seen in “The Resurrection.”
The eponymous chapter "Love Medicine" occurs in 1982 and introduces Lipsha Morrissey as a narrator. A major issue of conflict is the role of Roman Catholicism in Ojibwe culture. Lipsha and Nector conflate the two traditions, attending Holy Mass but incorporating their own beliefs. As an old man, no longer constrained by social proprieties, Nector would burst out with traditional songs in the middle of Mass or shout for God to hear. Lipsha explains his beliefs: "Now there's your God in the Old Testament and there is Chippewa Gods as well. Indian Gods, good and bad, like tricky Nanabozho or the water monster, Missepeshu [. . .]" (236). His conclusion is that God is deaf, so Nector must yell his prayers, or perhaps "we just don't speak [the Higher Power's] language" (236). Beliefs in Catholic or Christian cosmology and Ojibwe mythology are not mutually exclusive. However, Erdrich, who was raised Catholic, privileges Ojibwe tradition through the voice of Lipsha: "Our Gods aren't perfect, is what I'm saying, but at least they come around" (236).

At the request of Marie, Lipsha attempts to perform a love medicine on Nector to rein in his wandering lusts and unquenchable desire for Lulu Lamartine. Lipsha conjectures a ritual combination of his magic touch and goose hearts, since geese mate for life. He is not aware that Nector and Marie met and made love when Nector was delivering geese to the convent Marie was escaping in 1934. Because Lipsha's ineptitude prevents him from getting the goose hearts, he buys turkey hearts from the supermarket. For double insurance, he asks the Catholic priest to bless them, but the Father and a Sister both refuse. Lipsha blesses the hearts himself with holy water. A sacred ritual improperly performed precipitates sacrificial and tragic crisis. Indeed, Nector chokes on the turkey heart and dies. His death is comically rendered with Lipsha's desperate attempts at revival. Lipsha also understands, "It was other things that choked him as well. It
didn’t seem like he wanted to struggle or fight. Death came and tapped his chest, so he went just like that” (208). The horror of the scene is mediated by the comic incongruity and veracity of Lipsha’s observations.

If this episode were told in the tradition of Western Civilization, without trickster humor, it would merely be tragic. Lipsha, as trickster, flaunts the sacred details of ritual, assails the hierarchy of Catholicism, and provokes disaster. Nector’s death is a natural consequence of Lipsha’s ineptitude. In this novel the moment of death is mythical, not only because of the tragic consequences, but also because “his [Nector’s] life” flashes not before Nector but before Lipsha, synthesizing past, present, and future, and transforming Lipsha’s understanding. Lipsha is then able to offer true comfort to Marie, telling her that her husband “loved [her] over time and distance” (257). In grateful response, Marie gives Lipsha his mother’s beads. The “love medicine” is not necessarily a ritual gesture, but a lifetime of forgiving and loving. Through that loving and forgiving, the tribal community can move forward.

“Resurrection” is also dated 1982, but begins after Nector’s death. This chapter is new to the 1993 edition and raises questions about possibilities of redemption. Marie is mourning Nector’s death when Gordie appears at her door, drunk and disheveled. A reverie in the middle of the chapter invokes memories of Gordie’s young love with June and time they spent together before the vicissitudes of life disrupted their marriage and their ability to cope. However, in Gordie’s current state, even his mother fears he will harm himself and guards him with an ax. Marie resiliently overcomes many sorrows and tragedies in her life. Yet Gordie, like June and Henry, Jr., succumbs. These characters present the realities of reservation life with some individuals who cannot overcome their history and social circumstances and some who rise above. The suggestive title begs the question of who will and can be resurrected, perhaps in a
Christian sense, but also in a general way about those who can recover their lives from tremendous pain and sorrow.

"The Good Tears" moves the narrative forward another year to 1983. Its narrator is Lulu Lamartine. Although she has played a major role in events throughout the novel, this is the first time since her young voice that she tells her version. She bequeaths her trickster heritage to her son Gerry Nanapush and her grandson, Lipsha Morrissey. She has eight children by eight men, a fact she uses to her political advantage when her land is endangered and she threatens to reveal the names of the fathers in a public meeting. While Marie extends community beyond bloodlines, Lulu unmasks the genetic ties. She confesses to her son, Lyman, that Nector was his father. Later she will reveal to Lipsha his true biological parents.

Also in this chapter, Lulu and Marie come to a harmony of sorts. Both are living at the Senior Center, and they join together in their grief over Nector's death. Marie becomes Lulu's aide, putting drops in Lulu's eyes. After receiving the drops, Lulu tries to focus: "The light was cloudy but I could already see. [Marie] swayed down like a dim mountain, huge and blurred, the way a mother must look to her just born child" (297). Lulu's rebirth and Marie's mothering bring the former competitors together in a remarkable gesture of forgiveness. The imperative of survival of the heart allows the women to move beyond their pain and sorrow.

Like "The Plunge of the Brave," "The Tomahawk Factory" is a play on popular images of Indians. Added in the 1993 edition and set in 1983, it is narrated by Lyman Lamartine, who demonstrates his business prowess by starting a tribal enterprise that will produce authentic, tasteful, museum-quality Ojibwe artifacts. The chapter is full of satire, from the paperwork errors that empower Lyman to the mass-manufactured kitsch that competes with "Indian" goods from Taiwan, to the clan rivalries that emerge in a
melee. An undercurrent of tension in the factory is the renewed rivalry between Lulu and Marie. They finally speak of the man they shared, and all hell breaks loose. Their barbs bring out years of resentments and jealousies. At the center is Lyman, son of the man both women loved. Knowing he can deal with his mother later, Lyman steps into the opening and asks Marie about his father. In the end, they are the ones who reconcile, with Lyman apologizing and Marie forgiving. They two-step with an "easy grace" (324).

"Lyman’s Luck," also set in 1983, is another addition in the 1993 edition. This brief chapter sets the stage for the next book in the series, The Bingo Palace, and the introduction of Indian gaming. Lyman is a natural in anticipating the economic and political issues surrounding casinos.

Love Medicine’s final chapter brings the narrative back to 1984 and is titled “Crossing the Water.” Its main characters are from the first chapter of the book, with the addition of Gerry Nanapush. This chapter reveals the conflicts between urban and reservation Indians, but also shows how family ties can be healed. Gerry Nanapush derides King as an apple, “red on the outside white on the inside” (353). A simple reading would construe King (and Beverly Lamartine) in the rhetoric of the other characters who condemn his lack of tradition. His isolation from the tribal community is tragic, spiritually deadening. But despite his vacuous life, he bears the weight of race and the hope of endurance. King cannot survive by seeking or rejecting a traditional culture that no longer exists in pristine form, but must compound past and future by finding his own human capacities in current circumstances. King’s alienation is amplified by his Euroamerican wife, Lynnette. In a complex poker scene, King expiates his transgressions. Although he snitches on Gerry (earlier, his testimony had convicted the innocent fugitive), King plays by the rest of Gerry’s moral imperatives. Card crimping, a trick passed on by Lulu, gives
Gerry and Lipsha the advantage. King loses and reluctantly forfeits the car, a Firebird, bought with June's insurance money. After Gerry vanishes "into thin space" (359), King apologizes to the police, ensuring Gerry's ultimate escape.

King's life of self-indulgence had deprived his half-brother Lipsha of his inheritance, both in material goods and in understanding his ancestry. However, King functions as mediator, bringing Gerry and Lipsha together for the first time with knowledge of their true relationship as father and son, thus providing the mode of their deliverance. They drive together toward the Canadian border. The car, provided by June's legacy, becomes a mediator and a healing emblem. Lipsha's insights help him confront the truths about himself and his tribal heritage. His voice, clear and poetic, in the tradition of oral rhetoric, closes the novel:

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

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

The complicated world of modern Indians is presented in Love Medicine with numerous metaphors and images common to both Native American and dominant American cultures. Erdrich says, "Whether we like it or not, we are bound together by that which may be cheapest and ugliest in our culture but which may also
have an austere and resonant beauty in its economy of meaning” (“Where I Ought to Be” 23). The Ojibwe elements of Love Medicine emphasize the uniqueness of that specific Native American culture. Less obvious are iconic images of mainstream America that interweave throughout the novel: pickled eggs, pies, fishing hats, kitschy Indian art, Polar Bear refrigeration trucks, avocado green Sears appliances, learning enrichments and Sesame Street, and plastic tomahawks in Lyman’s factory. Placed in an American Indian context, these signs are given new meanings, obliging the reader in light of tribal experience to reconsider what is commonplace. Reading these signs in an Ojibwe context reaffirms tribal views. The imagery brings home the characters who mediate the emblems of many cultures to survive and celebrate their existence with hope toward the future.

The Bingo Palace (1994) continues to probe modern reservation issues, this time including tribal gaming and the powwow circuit. The characters of this novel are fewer in number than in the other books, as Lipsha Morrissey, Lyman Lamartine, and their object of desire, Shawnee Ray Toose, take center stage. Some of the children of Marie and Nector Kashpaw have their characters developed further.

Lyman’s systematic approach to business success is virtually opposite to Lipsha’s, who relies on luck and the spiritual guidance of his dead mother, June Morrissey. Lipsha’s luck pays off, and he wins a bingo van, an emblem of material comfort: “a starter home, a portable den with front-wheel drive,” “a four wheeled version of the state of North Dakota” (63, 80). Nevertheless, his good fortune does not last and he loses the van, along with his pride. Lipsha’s stream-of-consciousness narration extends back to the elements and images of Tracks, and especially to Fleur Pillager.
While the younger characters play out their lives, the backdrop is inhabited by the matriarchs Lulu Lamartine, Zelda Kashpaw, and Fleur Pillager. Lulu starts the book by mailing Lipsha a photocopy of Gerry's post office "Wanted" poster and taking home and framing the original. She finishes the book having returned to tribal traditions and being led off by federal marshals. Lipsha is distracted from Shawnee Ray when he embarks once again on an escape adventure with his father, Gerry. Erdrich leaves the fate of Lipsha and Gerry ambiguous when they are stranded in a blizzard and being led by the spirit of June. Although the incident is similar to the opening scene of Love Medicine, where June wanders off into the snow to freeze to death, Erdrich's theme of survival suggests they will not perish, as Tales of Burning Love confirms.

Most reviewers suggested that The Bingo Palace did not explore new territory as the other novels had. Still, Erdrich continued to reap praises for her lyrical writing. Reviewers missed Erdrich's introduction of a first-person plural narrative voice. The tribal "we" becomes more than a chorus of simple observers or reporters as they encourage action and respond emotionally. When Lulu is arrested, "We told her, we reminded her that she'd done wrong. [. . .] What can we do? Drawing deep breaths, hearts shaking, we can't help join her" (264-65).

Erdrich and Dorris planned the North Dakota novels to be elemental: Tracks represents the earth; images of air elevate The Beet Queen; Love Medicine has watery baptisms and drownings; The Bingo Palace is illuminated with images of light; and Tales of Burning Love has incendiary relationships. Characters surprisingly recur when different narrators recount the same events from varying points of view. Although some characters, like June Morrissey, perish, they keep living through storytelling or mythic appearance. Others, like Nanapush, Lulu, Gerry Nanapush, and
Lipsha Morrissey, survive through trickster escapades. Fleur has a continuing presence of power while Pauline/Sister Leopolda maintains her perversions until her final demise in *Tales of Burning Love*. While each novel features the death of a significant character, the survivors and the community triumph. Nonlinear narratives represent mythic time, and all events are bound by the land, whether through its loss in *Tracks*, fields in *The Beet Queen*, or the consuming blizzards in *Love Medicine*, *The Bingo Palace*, and *Tales of Burning Love*.

More creatively, subsequent novels in the North Dakota cycle reveal new information that returns the reader to important events in *Love Medicine*. Perhaps most prominent is the revelation from *Tracks* that Pauline Puyat/Sister Leopolda is Marie Lazarre's birth mother. When that layer of relationship is added, the motives and interactions become very complex—expressed as mother denying daughter, daughter unaware but pulled like a magnet to the aging nun/mother and accompanied by granddaughter. Marie's knowledge of these relationships is not revealed until *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. There she explains that she did not know Sister Leopolda was her mother during the first encounter in the convent, but when she returns with her own daughter, and she believes the nun is near death in "Flesh and Blood," she is aware of their history.

Similarly, the beginning of *Love Medicine* is given a whole new twist in *Tales of Burning Love*. That novel begins from the point of view of Jack Mauser, a mixed-blood oil rigger who picks up a woman in a bar in Williston, North Dakota. The action turns out to be identical to the first section of "The Greatest Fisherman in the World" but told from Jack's point of view. Once again, June Morrissey wanders off to die in the snow, but this narrative adds details of her demise: "She was looking to the east, her hair loaded with melting stars" (11). The discovery of her body ironically gives
her new life as a character and again she becomes a major entity in another novel.

The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse is most interesting as a companion to Tracks as the time frames are parallel and the characters carry over. Father Damien is revealed as Miss Agnes DeWitt. The gender borrowing is harrowing for him/her but s/he adjusts to the role. The Ojibwe characters are aware early on and do not seem to mind. Remarkably, the character is consistent with Father Damien’s appearance in Tracks thirteen years earlier. Both Marie and Lulu appear in chapters dated 1996. An investigation is being conducted by Father Jude (the foundling from The Beet Queen) as to whether or not Sister Leopolda should be considered worthy of sainthood. He interviews Marie, who is reluctant to discuss the matter. However, her information about her own awareness that Leopolda was her mother answers questions raised in Love Medicine and Tracks. Not surprisingly, Father Jude is seduced by Lulu. In themes that echo Love Medicine, Father Damien’s growth and understanding about healing and forgiving outside the bounds of institutional religion seem to qualify him for sainthood more than the perversities of Sister Leopolda qualify her. However, Father Damien’s narrative of Leopolda’s tortured history offers a space for compassion and understanding.

In “Endnotes” to The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, Erdrich playfully writes about her imagination and process of writing. Erdrich has taken a fixed genre of writing and reinvented it in a form of mutability, much like oral tradition of indigenous cultures. By revising and expanding an already successful novel, she affirms the living imperative of storytelling. By continuing to reveal information about characters and events, she compels the reader to reconsider what has already been written.
Although the secondary literature on Erdrich and *Love Medicine* is abundant, much of what is written fails to account for an indigenous world view. As Erdrich has repeatedly affirmed, she is a writer of fiction. While there are interesting historical connections and parallels specific to precise Ojibwe events and places, Erdrich creates a paradox where her fictive art reveals larger truths about Ojibwe peoples. Likewise, while there are similarities among characters and her own family histories and while Erdrich writes of familiar Indian experiences, her work is not patently autobiographical. Through her own writing, she has established a theoretical pattern that emphasizes indigenous issues grounded in tribal (Ojibwe) specificity, community, and survival humor.

Early literary criticisms of *Love Medicine* address thematic elements (Lansky, Schneider, and Smith, "Transpersonal"), narrative strategies (Schultz), and structural readings of Ojibwe culture (McKenzie). Louis Owens (Choctaw/Cherokee) offers one of the strongest interpretations of contemporary American Indian (Choctaw/Cherokee) experience: "The seemingly doomed Indian[s] [. . .] hang on in spite of it all, [and] confront with humor the pain and confusion of identity and, like a storyteller, weave a fabric of meaning and significance out of the remnants" (194).

A number of critics, nevertheless, have lamented the demise of Ojibwe culture specifically and Indians in general. Such an approach fails to acknowledge the survival of indigenous cultures against tremendous odds. The romantic idea of the Vanishing American has long plagued Indian peoples, who have learned to adapt and mediate in order to persevere.

Among the most common trends in addressing Erdrich's works is the assessment of the female characters. Too often critics make assumptions about feminism without considering the social and tribal constructions of gender. Therefore, seeing Erdrich's Ojibwe women merely as oppressed women of color overlooks their roles in
tribal societies. For example, Jennifer Shaddock’s essay begins with this premise: “Women, perhaps more than any other oppressed group, have internalized the cultural narrative that legitimizes our oppression” (106). Although Shaddock later confesses that Fleur survives, her assumption falls into the idea of the Vanishing American by focusing on subjugation and loss. Furthermore, by comparing the matrilineal Laguna in Silko’s writings to the patrilineal Ojibwe in Erdrich’s novels, a pueblo agrarian culture to a woodland culture, the author conflates individual tribes and undermines their sovereignties.

Another trend in Erdrich criticism is comparative ethnicities. When Erdrich is paired with other writers of color, like Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, Ernest Gaines, Gloria Naylor, Amy Tan, or Rudolfo Anaya, the particularities of American Indian, or even more specifically Ojibwe, experiences are blurred into a non-white people’s literature. Generalized discussions of how minority authors write against the mainstream culture tend to further objectify issues particular to each group. Additionally, by rendering great authors to a minority status, critics may fail to see the subject/speaker positively defining and articulating her or his own culture.

An extension of comparative ethnicities is the appropriation of the Latin American idea of magical realism in analyzing paranormal events in Erdrich’s books. Magical realism as a literary trend developed out of the political absurdities in the latter twentieth century and is most commonly associated with Gabriel García-Márquez. Seemingly natural events take on supernatural qualities, such as the blood running down streets and around corners in the city of Macondo or the baby who is carried away by ants in One Hundred Years of Solitude (1970). While transforming events also occur in Love Medicine, such as when Gordie believes the deer is June, and also in numerous places in Tracks and The Last Report.
on the Miracles at Little No Horse, they are not responses to political absurdities. These “magical events” occur in the contexts of Ojibwe mythologies. They are rooted in sacred creation stories, such as tales of the deer people (expanded in The Antelope Wife, 1998), rather than constructed political responses.

A number of critical articles discuss Erdrich’s incarnations of the trickster characters. The ground-breaking article about this topic was published by Catt in 1991. Sharon Manybeads Bowers, John Slack, and Barbara Pittman add to that discussion. Nancy Peterson and James Stripes discuss Erdrich’s revisions of history. Two most interesting discussions of incorporation of Ojibwe mythology are offered by Karah Stokes as she compares a traditional Two Sisters story to Marie and Lulu and by Kristan Sarve-Gorham in her excellent essay comparing twin motifs in Tracks and Love Medicine. John Purdy discusses a teaching approach that emphasizes polar oppositions, but Karla Sanders shows how diametrical opposites can be transcended in order to heal. Kathleen Sands, in one of the early articles on Love Medicine, is especially sensitive to Ojibwe social structures, including the function of gossip.

Studies in American Indian Literatures has devoted two issues to Erdrich scholarship. Since that time there has been a slow shift from criticism about Love Medicine to Tracks. Certainly with the complexity and new issues from The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, there will be an abundance of writing that will reconsider the previous works.

Six individual volumes have been devoted to Erdrich. Two are anthologies. In Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine: A Casebook, Hertha D. Sweet Wong compiles a number of previously published articles and interviews. Most of the articles are listed in the references below. The collection of essays, The Chippewa Landscape of Louise Erdrich edited by Allan Chavkin, is disappointing.
Although the book was published in 1999, the essayists seem caught off-guard by the 1996 publication of Erdrich’s novel, *Tales of Burning Love*. Several of the essays erroneously refer to *The Bingo Palace* (1994) as Erdrich’s most recent novel and then tack on undeveloped references to *Tales of Burning Love*. Most glaringly, Catherine Rainwater’s essay on ethnic semiotics wrongly concludes that Lipsha freezes to death in the end of *The Bingo Palace* when *Tales of Burning Love* affirms his survival.

Other essays in the Chavkin collection have inexplicable omissions: William J. Shieck’s analysis of the short story “A Wedge of Shade” does not consider how Erdrich reworks the story for a chapter of the same title in *Tales of Burning Love*. Robert F. Gish similarly does not regard Erdrich’s poem “Jacklight” in his discussion of hunting as metaphor in *Love Medicine*, even though Annette Van Dyke explains the Jacklight/hunting sexual metaphor in her essay on “Female Power in the Novels of Louise Erdrich.” While Chavkin evaluates the political implications of the revised and expanded text of *Love Medicine*, he does not place the modifications within the tribal context of oral tradition of telling and retelling narratives.

The strongest essays in the Chavkin collection are John Purdy’s discussion of gambling and chance, and Robert A. Morace’s Bakhtinian reading of the carnivalesque in Erdrich’s works. LaVonne Brown Ruoff’s afterword offers personal insight to the development of Erdrich’s literary career. With Nancy Feyl Chavkin, editor Allan Chavkin has compiled a selected bibliography of primary and secondary sources. However, the collection as a whole falls short of providing a Chippewa context for Erdrich’s writings as the title provocatively suggests.

Peter Beidler and Gay Barton’s *A Reader’s Guide to the Novels of Louise Erdrich* carefully presents time lines, genealogies, geographic identifications, and character definitions. As a study guide,
the approach thoroughly clarifies, delineates, and cross-references the complicated relationships among Erdrich’s characters, places, and times. This meticulousness, however, is also the book’s weakness; the authors have imposed a linear and categorical template on Erdrich’s nonlinear tales and tribal and communal relationships. By fixing interpretations, kinships, and places, this encyclopedic critical approach loses the essence of Erdrich’s narrative enchantments and suggestive ambiguities.

In the “Endnotes” to *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Erdrich plays a bit with Beidler and Barton’s fastidious attempt to precisely locate the reservation of her novels. She comments, “[T]he reservation depicted in this and in all of my novels is an imagined place consisting of landscapes and features similar to many Ojibwe reservations. It is an emotional collection of places dear to me” (357). Rather than seeking the literalism of Erdrich’s images, readers and critics should listen to the larger story.

Lorena L. Stookey’s *Louise Erdrich: A Critical Companion* is an introductory work to the basic literary elements of the writings. Connie A. Jacobs’ *The Novels of Louise Erdrich: Stories of Her People* is the most comprehensive work thus far in working to show Ojibwe contexts in Erdrich’s writings, along with theories of orality and contemporary criticism. Nevertheless, a critical approach emphasizing indigenous issues, land, and culture, as theorized by Craig Womack, is still needed for *Love Medicine* and Erdrich’s other works.

Perhaps the best guide to Erdrich’s writings are her own comments in essays and interviews. Many of the early interviews are compiled in *Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris*, edited by Chavkin and Chavkin.

Erdrich’s cycle of North Dakota novels is an extraordinary achievement. She has paradoxically created an Ojibwe experience
in the context of the novelistic tradition, yet she bends that tradition within the scope of storytelling, overlapping temporal and narrative techniques. The anchor of that tradition is *Love Medicine*, which heals through the continuing story of survival.
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