"She was the funnel of our history": cultural voice in Louise Erdrich's novels

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"She was the funnel of our history": Cultural voice in Louise Erdrich's novels

by

Diane Marie Ishmael Wright

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

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Approved.

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

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INTRODUCTION

Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* sold more copies than the first novel of any previous American Indian author and, while none of her subsequent novels has had such commercial success, she has become a powerful voice in the world of Native American literature. The novels' North Dakota setting, their insightful portrayal of the lives of American Indians, and Erdrich's Chippewa heritage make it tempting to position her as a voice for all Indian peoples. Asked if she considers herself a Native American writer, Erdrich responds, "[w]hile it is certainly true that a good part of my background, and Michael's background, and a lot of the themes are Native American, I prefer to simply be a writer." Her husband Michael Dorris adds that it is "entirely possible hypothetically that either of us could write a book that did not have an Indian character in it. . . . It adds a level of complication to say that you are a Native American writer because it sets up expectations in readers which you may or may not fulfill for them" (quoted in Wong 31, 32).

While Erdrich is proud of her Chippewa background, she is wary of the limitations imposed by such a classification. She remarks to another interviewer, "in a general sense I would rather that Native American writing be seen as American writing, that the best of any ethnic group here would be included in American writing" (quoted in White and
Erdrich may resist becoming a voice for all American Indian peoples, but she repeatedly acknowledges the importance of her Chippewa heritage to her life and writing. Many readers find the episodic nature and general lack of a linear chronology in her novels difficult to follow, while Erdrich and Dorris believe that her narrative approach reflects the influence of Chippewa oral storytelling tradition. According to Dorris, "It (Love Medicine) is a story cycle in the traditional sense. One of the interesting reviews of the book was talking about the fact that nobody in the book is right, that in fact it is community voice, that the point of view is the community voice and the means of exchanging information is gossip, and so consequently there is no narrator; there is no single protagonist, but rather it is the entire community dealing with the upheavals that emerge from the book and will now emerge from four books" (quoted in Coltelli 22). With Dorris's help, Erdrich develops her stories by discussing each episode and the characters involved; "when we make up a story, we're talking" (Schumacher 176). Erdrich's writing process and the arrangement of stories in each novel are consistent with Paula Gunn Allen's assertion that "[t]raditional tribal narratives possess a circular structure, incorporating event within event, piling meaning
upon meaning, until the accretion finally results in a story" (79).

Chippewa mythology is also behind Erdrich's decision to write a series of four novels. The number four, Erdrich explains, is "the number of completion in Ojibway mythology" (Wong 45). Set on and around a fictional reservation in North Dakota, the quartet is "a saga that takes place over about eighty years, a hundred years, and is an analogy in a way, of all the processes that people in this part of the country have gone through" (Dorris, quoted in Coltelli 22). The novels are connected by their shared geographic location, characters who migrate from one novel to the next, and imagery drawn from the four elements: water, air, earth, fire. While each book is "tied to one of the four elements" (Wong 45), images of the other three are always present, adding to the continuity of the novels.

Although many of the characters from The Beet Queen do not reappear in the other novels, character migration in those three also provides a sense of continuity and familiarity, so that we know most of those present and need simply to catch up on their stories. The relationships among the characters can be best explained by beginning with Tracks and working forward chronologically through The Beet Queen, Love Medicine, and The Bingo Palace. Tracks is narrated by Nanapush, an elder of the tribe, and Pauline
Puyat, a mixed-blood who denies her Indian heritage to become a Catholic nun, but not before she gives birth to an illegitimate child, Marie Lazzare of Love Medicine. Nanapush tells his story to Lulu Nanapush, best described as his godchild, daughter of Fleur Pillager and, possibly, Eli Kashpaw. Fleur’s only remaining relative is a cousin, Moses Pillager, who is known as Old Man Pillager in Love Medicine and is the father, with Lulu Nanapush--later Lamartine--of Gerry Nanapush.

From the cast of characters in Tracks, only Pauline (as Sister Leopolda), Eli, and Fleur reappear in The Beet Queen; Eli and Pauline have small roles in Love Medicine, and Fleur’s story is picked up again in The Bingo Palace. Eli’s mother, Rushes Bear, does not figure prominently outside of Tracks, but his brother Nector marries Marie Lazzare and becomes a central character in Love Medicine. Marie and Nector have many children, of which their biological daughter Zelda and adopted daughter June appear in more than one novel. Nector also has an affair with Lulu which results in the birth of her son Lyman Lamartine, an important figure in The Bingo Palace. Lipsha Morrissey, a central character in both Love Medicine and The Bingo Palace, is the illegitimate son of June Kashpaw and Gerry Nanapush.

Louis Owens writes that "no reader can come away from
Love Medicine without recognizing the essential Indianness of Erdrich’s cast and concerns” (Other Destinies 205), and, despite the very German-American characters of The Beet Queen, readers tend to expect her writing to be about Native Americans and their struggles to survive both on and off the reservation. The strong American Indian characters of Love Medicine come alive for many readers through Erdrich’s masterful storytelling. Dorris admits that "our number one worry was how Indians would feel about it. Would it ring true? And it did" (quoted in Cryer 85). In The Beet Queen, Erdrich leaves the reservation to depict the lives of her German-American ancestors. While it may not be the story most readers were expecting after Love Medicine, The Beet Queen has equally memorable characters who show us that the fantastic lies just below the surface of the mundane. Her third novel, Tracks, returns to the reservation to tell the stories of the generation preceding Love Medicine. It did not receive the critical acclaim of Erdrich’s first novels, although critics generally agree that it is a better novel than The Beet Queen. The most notable feature of Tracks is its paired narrators, instead of the multiple first person narration Erdrich’s readers encounter in the other two novels. The Bingo Palace completes Erdrich’s quartet by bringing readers up to date on the lives of most of the characters from Love Medicine. Although it is also set on
the reservation, *The Bingo Palace* has only one first person narrator, the communal narration of the previous novels is missing.

Writing about Erdrich's first three novels, Catherine Catt suggests that "[i]n her written works, Louise Erdrich may be investigating her own place and purpose as a surviving Native American in addition to reinforcing the possibility of survival for others" (71). Growing up near the reservation where her grandfather had served as tribal chairman and then attending both Dartmouth and Johns Hopkins Universities has given Erdrich a bi-culturality which, at its best, informs and strengthens her writing. While some familiarity with American Indian cultures will deepen a reader's appreciation of Erdrich's writing--and might clear up the misconception that there is no humor in these stories--it is by no means a requirement for enjoying them. Owens points out that in *Love Medicine*

Erdrich does not ignore the racism and brutality of Euramerica's dealings with Indian people, but for the first time in a novel by a Native American author, she makes the universality of Indian lives and tragedies easily accessible to non-Indian readers. (*Other Destinies* 205)

Erdrich masters the non-Indian medium of the novel to communicate a powerful message of Indian survival and continuance.

At times, however, the relationship between Indian and European traditions is stilted and the stories falter.
Moving backwards in time according to character’s lives, from *The Bingo Palace* to *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, and finally *Tracks*, we can see a pattern which links the success of each novel to the balance Erdrich establishes between being a novelist and having a cultural voice. In *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*, where the stories are strongly tied to the reservation and the tribal community, the narrative voices are strong and the imagery works to subtly enrich the novels. *The Beet Queen* strains under the implied tension between Indian and Euramerican cultures, leading to imagery which often seems to work in reverse. Ultimately, though, there is resolution for the characters and continuity in the novel. *The Bingo Palace* does not withstand the Indian/Euramerican conflict because the conflict is not within the subject of the story but rather in the choice of narrative voice. This novel is pulled apart when Erdrich leaves the community voice to concentrate on the individual.
THE BINGO PALACE

The Bingo Palace (1994), published ten years after Love Medicine, picks up the story of Lipsha Morrissey's life after he returns to the reservation in his mother June's blue firebird, and develops the stories of some minor characters who appear in Love Medicine. This final novel in Erdrich's quartet bears little resemblance to her other three and, except for the reappearance of familiar characters, is not a book one would readily identify as having been written by her. Prior to The Bingo Palace, readers were most bothered by The Beet Queen and its less "Indian" concerns and unspectacular characters. In The Bingo Palace, Erdrich returns to the contemporary reservation, but proceeds to overcompensate for the failings of The Beet Queen. One reviewer observes, "Erdrich, unusual for her, even resorts to sermonizing about gambling's malign effect on the reservation" (Kirkus Reviews 1410). This does not mean Erdrich explores the issue in depth, for, as Louis Owens notes, "Erdrich seems to have taken a breather with The Bingo Palace," and "[i]t is all light stuff, the kind of fiction that may make us feel rather pleasant but isn't designed to disturb or challenge" ("Return" 339-340). Erdrich claims that this novel was the easiest one to write; she finished most of the first draft in six weeks (Chavkin 244). The contrived feel of the novel and its sluggish pace
make it the most difficult of the four to read, however, and a disappointing conclusion to what is otherwise a consistent and cohesive series.

Following Erdrich's plan that each novel be associated with the imagery of one of the elements, *The Bingo Palace* takes fire as its unifying symbolism. Yet from the beginning the writing feels labored, the imagery forced and clichéd. While in the earlier novels Erdrich manipulates the images of water, air, and land to create multiple unexpected meanings, in *The Bingo Palace*, she merely uses fire in a conventional representation of passion: Lipsha and Lyman's passion for Shawnee, Lyman's passion for success, and Zelda's passion for Xavier Toose. Only Gerry Nanapush's passion for freedom and justice, the latter shared by Albertine Johnson, is distinctive and interesting. It would be a disservice to disagree with how Erdrich uses fire imagery here by assuming that stories of passion do not exist in traditional tribal narratives; that is not true. It is simply more common for Chippewa stories about fire—as documented by Sister Coleman, Ellen Frogner, and Estelle Eich in *Ojibwa Myths and Legends*, and also by Victor Barnouw in *Wisconsin Chippewa Myths and Tales*—to be concerned with the acquisition of fire, usually Trickster's theft of fire, and its value to the people for survival. This indigenous theme, drawing on "[t]he qualities of fire--its resemblance
to living things, its creation of light, and its relationship to the sun" (Gill and Sullivan 89), would serve Erdrich better and create a stronger connection between The Bingo Palace and her first three novels.

Erdrich's primary focus for romantic passion in The Bingo Palace is Lipsha's quest to win Shawnee Ray Toose as his lover, and away from his uncle Lyman Lamartine, the father of Shawnee's son. Lipsha is the only character allowed to speak in first person--we hear the other characters' stories from an omniscient narrator--and, consequently, we learn much more than we care to know about Lipsha's fantasies concerning Shawnee. His obsession with her leads to tedious meditations on the nature of love:

Love is hard, loneliness a sure bet. All the songs I listen to and moan over bear this truth. When do you ever hear a song about the fullness and the romance, the dream come into its own? No matter how hard I try, love is just beyond the tips of my fingers, precious as a field of diamonds and elusive, receding fast. The big bang world is love--we have sex and everything explodes and ever after the pieces are whirling free. (BP 97)

David Holmstrom observes that this "[u]nrelieved passionate longing . . . strains the reasoning behind the writing. When the carriers of the heart of a novel ring goofy, the resulting concentric circles become harder to believe" (13). The few times Lipsha does decide to act the outcome is melodramatic: He strips while he tries to woo Shawnee and grips her knees in an attempt to convince her of the
seriousness of his marriage proposal.

While many have criticized what they consider the episodic nature of Erdrich’s novels and the confusion created by her use of multiple narrators, the (re)telling of events through the first person experience of each character involved creates a cohesiveness in Love Medicine, The Beet Queen, and Tracks. As a result, the reader also becomes involved in interpreting each event and has a personal stake in each character’s life. Such intimacy is lacking in The Bingo Palace, where the only "I" is Lipsha and the remaining individuals lack the depth Erdrich usually develops in even marginal characters. Instead of multiple events which bring characters together, The Bingo Palace has sub-plots which pertain directly to only one individual, are not fully developed, and usually do not bring the reader to a deeper understanding of the character. These sub-plots include Lyman’s schemes to build a bigger and better bingo palace, Shawnee’s dreams of becoming a designer, Zelda’s return to her first love, and Gerry’s final(?) escape from prison. While the omniscient narration reveals aspects of these characters’ lives which Lipsha is not aware of, it does not draw the reader into their lives. We neither care for nor dislike them.

The novel begins with the voice of the tribal community discussing Lipsha’s shortcomings. "Spirits pulled his
fingers when he was a baby, yet he doesn't appreciate his powers. His touch was strong but he shorted it out," and, despite his high scores on the college tests, "nothing captured his interest. Nothing held him" (BP 7-8). "There was no place the boy could fit" (9), is their conclusion. Lipsha spends the rest of the novel proving the community right: He dishonors his power by selling it, allows his grandfather's pipe to be dishonored by a border guard who drags the eagle feather along the ground, and he dishonors Shawnee by refusing to see her as anything except his lover. Nothing is sacred to Lipsha, not even the religious ceremonies of his tribe, and his "main motive in getting traditional is the hope of attracting Shawnee Ray's attention to [his] staying power" (158), or at least to "see a vision that will fix [his] mind higher, above the belt" (170). While we are expected to forgive Lipsha his lack of commitment and place the blame on June for trying to drown him as an infant and then deserting him, it is difficult to forget that at the end of Love Medicine he was reunited with his father, assured of his place in the tribe as a Nanapush man, and convinced: "The thought of June grabbed my heart so, but I was lucky she turned me over to Grandma Kashpaw" (LM 272). Although his actions in Love Medicine do not always achieve the desired results, at least he acts. In The Bingo Palace, "he substitutes sorry rumination and talk
for meaningful, or even interesting, action" (Owens "Return" 338). Lipsha talks much, does little, and reaches the end of the book without any significant changes in his character from the beginning.

Critics are not unanimous in denouncing *The Bingo Palace*, and a *Wall Street Journal* reviewer claims that in *The Bingo Palace* the magic Erdrich works in *Love Medicine* is "back as bright as ever" (Hower A8). The crux of disagreement between readers who do or do not enjoy *The Bingo Palace* is Lipsha as its central narrator. Edward Hower considers Lipsha "a magnificent creation: determined, vulnerable, innocent, funny--a kind of sacred clown out of Indian lore, who must first experience humiliation in order to achieve greatness" (A8). In a review for *Tribune Books*, Michael Upchurch goes so far as to say that "[w]hen Erdrich sticks closely to Lipsha’s story of unrequited love and ineffectual yearning for the comfort of tribal tradition, the book works well" (14:9). But one possible explanation for Lipsha’s unrequited love is "Erdrich’s failure to convince us that Lipsha is worth loving" (Antioch Review 366). Owens sums up the position of those who feel Lipsha fails as the central narrator: "At the heart of what doesn’t work here is Lipsha himself. It’s very difficult to care about his rather silly self-pitying" ("Review" 339). Although Lipsha is a likable person who wins over the
readers of Love Medicine with his sincere but misguided attempt to create a love medicine for his grandparents, readers of The Bingo Palace find it easy to agree with Shawnee Ray when she tells him "You got the medicine, Lipsha. But you don’t got the love" (BP 112).

Lack of change and growth is perhaps also central to the disappointing nature of The Bingo Palace. Characters we have great hope for at the end of Love Medicine have not only not progressed, they have, in many respects, regressed. Lipsha is still lost and searching for his identity despite Catherine Catt’s observation that, in Love Medicine, "Lipsha actually brings both of his parents home as part of himself and they will continue on through him into the future" (81), or Owens’ contention that "we know that Lipsha has finally arrived at a coherent sense of his place within the community . . . from which identity springs" (Other Destinies 196).

Like Lipsha’s life, Gerry Nanapush’s is bleaker than we expect to find it and the general hope for survival dimmer than in any of the preceding novels. In Love Medicine, Lipsha drives his father, Gerry, to freedom in Canada but in The Bingo Palace we find out that Gerry has been recaptured and has spent a great amount of time in solitary confinement. Once full of life and mystery, a modern day embodiment of Chippewa trickster and culture hero
Nanabozho⁸, Gerry is no longer "the man whose eyes lighted, who shed sparks" (BP 24). Now his look is "hungry" and his gaze "razor desperate" (25). Erdrich even revives the powerful Fleur Pillager from Tracks, only to have her lose her land, again, to Lyman’s bingo palace and her life in exchange for Lipsha’s. We are left wondering if either is worth the sacrifice.

Those characters whose lives exhibit balance and direction in The Bingo Palace--Lulu Lamartine, Lyman, and Shawnee--are relegated to the sidelines and their stories almost forgotten unless they somehow relate to Lipsha’s life. Ironically they, unlike Lipsha, turn to the traditional ways of the tribe for personal strength, and we experience more hope and power in the brief glimpses Erdrich gives us of their lives than in all of Lipsha’s dreams and revelations. For example, Lulu, grandmother to Lipsha and mother of Gerry and Lyman, has become a force in the tribe, manipulating the system which keeps her son in prison in order to bring about his return to Minnesota. When federal police arrest her at the end of the novel--for stealing government property, Gerry’s wanted poster, not for harboring her escaped son as they had expected--Lulu is "dressed traditional" (BP 261), "dances the old-lady traditional," and lets loose "the old-lady trill, the victory yell" (265) until other residents of the retirement
village join her. Lulu has grown from an angry young woman who would not acknowledge her mother in *Tracks*, to a tribal matriarch who "understands" (130) her mother and her Pillager heritage.

Such instances of reconciliation and epiphany are rare in *The Bingo Palace*; but two forceful and magical ones appear in the chapters "Lyman Dancing" and "Shawnee Dancing," and they represent Erdrich's writing at its best. Lyman's vision quest results in the most moving moment in the book, the vision coming to him while he is dancing, "the first time, ever, that he didn't dance for money" (BP 203). We learn that every time Lyman dances it is also for his brother Henry, "to keep Henry alive, to give him heart, for his drowned ghost was restless and low in spirit" (204). Through his vision dance Lyman finally connects with Henry's spirit and finds forgiveness for both failing to save Henry and for surviving the pull of the river. He is free to dance the loss of his brother to the current and his own victory over the river, and at the end Henry reassures him: "It is calm, so calm/In that place where I am/My little brother" (205).

A memory, not a vision, inspires Shawnee as she prepares to dance the jingle dance at the Montana Powwow in hopes of winning the first prize money which will enable her to attend college. With the jingle dance come memories of
her father who "had so often helped her with the steps" (BP 182). As she waits for the dance to begin, Shawnee remembers the day her father rubbed the wings of a butterfly into her shoulders and arms and told her to "[a]sk the butterfly . . . for help, for grace" (184). Images of the butterfly awake in Shawnee a knowledge of her own abilities, how "light and powerful" (184) she is. She does not win first place, but with the memory of the butterfly Shawnee finds the strength within herself to go to college as a single mother and pursue her dreams. She draws on her connections to the tribe, her past, and her sense of self to avoid becoming a drunk like her sisters and is, as even Lipsha realizes, "the best of our past, our present, our hope of a future" (13).

Despite these and a few other moments in the narrative when Erdrich takes us beyond Liphsa’s story into the community, the weight of the novel lies on Liphsa, who is not strong enough to carry it through. Perhaps Erdrich meant for The Bingo Palace to have more unity in an attempt to challenge those critics who consider Love Medicine a loose collection of short stories rather than a novel. Upchurch thinks The Bingo Palace is "the closest Erdrich has come to pulling off a single sustained novel-length narrative" (14:9), but he still argues that her talent lies in the short story, not in novels.
The debate over Erdrich as short story writer versus novelist is only a distraction, however. The real issue and the key to what works, or does not work, in these novels is her decision whether to emphasize the individual or the community. In each chapter of Love Medicine, The Beet Queen, and Tracks--several of which have been published as short stories and have won awards--Erdrich brings vibrant individuals to life for the reader. She also achieves this in a few chapters of The Bingo Palace, two examples being "Lyman Dancing" and "Shawnee Dancing." But in the first three novels Erdrich is then able to go the next step and bring those separate stories, separate individuals, together into a unified narrative about a community or family. Ultimately, those novels are not dominated by any one character’s story, and the short stories connect to create a broader narrative. The Bingo Palace has just as many potentially interesting characters as the other books, but they are merely used as props for Lipsha’s story and are not allowed to become fully realized individuals in the eyes of the reader.
LOVE MEDICINE

Love Medicine (1984) began as a series of unconnected short stories. When Erdrich and Dorris recognized that characters were reappearing in the different stories under different names, they went back to the stories, revised according to what they had come to know about these characters, and added some chapters to fill in narrative gaps. The result was Erdrich’s first novel. Although she began working on Tracks several years earlier, the burden of trying to write "with the weight of the world on the shoulders of My Novel" (quoted in Grantham 18) made it difficult for her to complete the manuscript. The process of writing Love Medicine--beginning with short stories rather than with the goal to complete a novel--seems to have diverted Erdrich’s attention from any preconceived ideas of what a writer of Native American descent ought to write about. This in turn allowed her to focus on the stories and create believable characters and situations.

While Erdrich may not have set out to write an American Indian novel, the form and content of Love Medicine are consistent with Paula Gunn Allen’s description of the structure of tribal narrative which is quite unlike that of western fiction; it is not tied to any particular time line, main character, or event. It is tied to a particular point of view—that of the tribe’s tradition—and to a specific idea—that of the ritual tradition and accompanying perspective that inform the narrative. (79)
Erdrich maintains a tribal point of view by allowing multiple voices to narrate her novel, giving it the feel of a traditional oral narrative as told by different storytellers in the tribe. Certain characters within the novel--in particular Lulu Lamartine and Marie Kashpaw--are also good storytellers; they depend on stories to (re)unite individuals or families and to insure the continuation of the tribe. Through these stories, readers experience the world from an American Indian perspective. We discover Trickster thriving in the twentieth century and recognize how power in nature empowers the people. In Love Medicine, "[t]he fact that the characters are on a reservation is important, says Erdrich--but not as important as the linked themes of survival and the healing power of life: 'The people are first, their ethnic background is second'" (quoted in Grantham 14). As the characters in Love Medicine move steadily toward home, family, and community, many find healing--some do not. What becomes clear to the reader and to many of the characters is that storytelling is the tool for rebuilding families and communities which have been broken.

The story of June Kashpaw’s last trip home opens the novel and, despite her death in that first chapter, she becomes a focal point for other characters. Her life and death influence the lives of most characters in some way,
however slight. Fraught with Christian and tribal symbolism, June’s story has been read as a revision, or at least an evocation, of the Easter resurrection story. Louis Owens suggests that in this combination of Christian and Chippewa mythology, Erdrich underscores the twin elements that will make whole the fragmented lives of the novel: the commitment beyond the self that lies both at the heart of the Christian myth and, very crucially, at the center of the American Indian community where individualism and egotism are shunned and 'we' takes precedence over the 'I' celebrated in the Euramerican tradition, and, just as important, a refusal to acquiesce to static definitions of identity. (Other Destinies 197)

Those individuals who leave the community of the reservation, like June and her niece Albertine Johnson, are often criticized and rebuked. When Albertine’s mother finally writes her of June’s death, she chides,

'We knew you probably couldn’t get away from your studies for the funeral . . . so we never bothered to call and disturb you.’

She always used the royal we, to multiply the censure of what she said by invisible others. (LM 7)

Seeking comfort in their stories, Albertine is eventually drawn home by the promise of community and family. As her mother, grandmother, and aunt re-tell the story of June’s death and share anecdotes about her life, they are able to work through their grief and guilt: "The sisters sniffed, fished Kleenex from their sleeves, glanced pensively at one another, and put the story to rest" (21). While Albertine is still able to return to her family and feel at home, she
recognizes the strain this places on relationships. As a result of that strain, her cousin constantly fights with his white wife when they visit from the cities and they eventually destroy several pies saved for the next day's family dinner. Although she works carefully to put them back together, just as characters work throughout the novel to piece together severed relationships, Albertine admits that "once they smash there is no way to put them right" (39).

Lissa Schneider observes that, in Love Medicine, "storytelling--characters sharing their troubles or their 'stories' with one another--becomes a spiritual act, a means of achieving transformation, transcendence, forgiveness" (1). The opposite is also true; failure to tell a story leads to further pain, isolation, and destruction. Those who cannot tell their story or do not value the real story of their lives suffer alienation and lose their sense of identity. Henry Lamartine, Jr. and King Kashpaw are two such characters. Tongue-tied by the horrors of the Vietnam war and confused by his identification with a Vietnamese prisoner, Henry is unable to take pride in his status as a warrior or to share these emotions and stories with his family: He "is denied the ritual catharsis of recounting his exploits when the warrior tradition of the past does not agree with the present reality" (Barry and Prescott 124).
His brother, Lyman, feels the silence, noting

the change was no good. You could hardly expect him to change for the better, I know. But he was quiet, so quiet . . . now you couldn't get him to laugh, or when he did it was more the sound of a man choking, a sound that stopped up the throats of other people around him. (LM 147-48)

The stories that Henry cannot share build in him until they choke off any other attempts at speech. Soon he is no longer able to contain the stories and scenes and he breaks "like stones break all of a sudden when water boils up inside them" (152). Because he can neither speak nor remain silent, Henry leaps into the river and disappears. King, June Kashpaw's legitimate son, has no problem telling stories about his experiences in Vietnam, although no one is sure King actually made it to Vietnam and Lipsha asserts, "He's no vet" (36). Yet while his war stories may be made up, the stories King tells prison guards about Gerry Nanapush's plans for escape are all too real. By "snitching" on a fellow prisoner and Chippewa, King makes his alienation from the tribal community complete. He is "red on the outside, white on the inside" (259) and belongs in neither the Indian nor the white world.

As Henry and King's experiences demonstrate, Erdrich does not gloss over the problems many Indians, on or off the reservation, have in realizing and preserving their identity. This is true even for members of the older generation who can remember a time without reservations.
The importance of staying connected to land and traditions, specifically the oral tradition, is illustrated through the lives of the Kashpaw brothers. Descendants of a family "respected as the last hereditary leaders of this tribe" (*LM* 89), Nector Kashpaw was sent to government boarding school to learn the white ways while his brother Eli stayed home. Although Nector fought the political battles to keep the reservation from being terminated, he cannot pass his knowledge on to the next generation because he no longer controls his own memories. Albertine wants to learn "about things that happened before my time, things I’d been too young to understand" (17), but Nector is cut off from her by a mind gone "wary and wild" (17). It is Eli, a recluse and "real old-timer" (28), who has knowledge of the old ways and who, as King’s white girlfriend asserts, must teach the others about their heritage.

In traditional Indian cultures, heritage—which includes the history of the tribe and of families in the tribe—was taught through stories. Characters in *Love Medicine*, especially Lipsha Morrissey, are seeking storytellers to teach them both their tribal and personal history. As Claire Crabtree observes, "[t]he tracing of lineage is endowed with great importance; both male and female characters grapple with the relationship between lineage, representing a tie to the community and to the
past, and the here-and-now issue of personal identity" (49). Abandoned as an infant, Lipsha does not know his parents or his position in the tribe. When Albertine begins to tell him about his mother, Lipsha, afraid of what he might learn, refuses to hear her, but he cannot stop Lulu Lamartine when she insists on giving him the "knowledge that could make or break [him]" (245). His last name implies that he is a mixed-blood, but Lipsha learns that, name not withstanding, he is the son of June Kashpaw and Gerry Nanapush, grandson of Lulu and the last Pillager medicine man. The novel ends with the affirmation of Lipsha’s identity as a "Nanapush man" (271), a member of the community with a rich family history.

As the son of June and Gerry, Lipsha is also identified with the traditional figure of Trickster, a central character in Indian stories of creation and social responsibility, including those of the Chippewa. Commenting on June’s importance to the novel, Owens explains that

> Just as the traditional trickster’s role is not only to upset and challenge us but also to remind us---obversely---of who we are and where we belong, June will figure throughout the novel as a touchstone for the other characters. (Other Destinies 196)

June wanders through the novel as Trickster wanders through the world, but she is not the only Trickster in this novel. Catherine Catt and William Gleason identify several other characters who they believe "act Tricksterian" (Gleason 60).
Gleason says "the men in particular roam, eat, and love their way through the book" (60), while Catt (81) finds attributes of the Trickster especially dominant in the Nanapush family. Gerry Nanapush has the Trickster's "ability to change form" and his mother Lulu exhibits the "sexual greed" (80) attributed to Trickster in many tribes.

By embodying the irrepressible Trickster spirit in the likeable criminal Gerry Nanapush, who "boasted that no steel or concrete shitbarn could hold a Chippewa" (LM 160), Erdrich deftly introduces her non-Native readers to a world view in which good and evil are not always incompatible. Gerry, "famous politicking hero, dangerous armed criminal, judo expert, escape artist, charismatic member of the American Indian Movement, and smoker of many pipes of kinnikinnick in the most radical groups" (248), is the namesake of Naanabozho, "the compassionate woodland trickster" who "is a teacher and healer in various personalities" (Vizenor People 3-4). But, "more than a magnanimous teacher and transformer, the trickster is capable of violence, deceptions, and cruelties: the realities of human imperfections" (4). Lipsha glories in his father's mythical abilities: "He could fly. He could strip and flee and change into shapes of swift release" (LM 266). In contrast, Gerry suffers with the sacrifices he has had to make: "I won't ever really have what you'd call a
home" (268). Erdrich's unsentimental portrayal of Gerry's life allows him to exist as a modern day Trickster, free to inspire his people and challenge society in true Trickster fashion.

Erdrich's association of Gerry with Trickster ties Love Medicine to a vital tradition of stories and a way of thinking about the world. She further emphasizes connection to the past and, consequently, to the natural world which was integral to that past through the older generation. In her descriptions of Lulu, Marie, Eli, and Nector, Erdrich associates their personalities with nature, specifically with the elements of fire, earth, and water. Air, the fourth element Erdrich has identified as important to her series of novels, is not linked to any particular character in Love Medicine. Lulu is best described in the language of fire. She is "in love with the whole world," an all encompassing, all consuming love which leads her to "open my mouth wide, my ears wide, my heart, and . . . let everything inside" (216). When Lulu sees herself in Nector's eyes she finds the culprit who burned down her home, but she also sees her own essence: "My house was on fire in his eyes, and I was trapped there, alone, on fire with my own fire" (LM 225). Her lovers also describe Lulu in terms of fire as well. Beverly Lamartine notes, "(her eyes) were so black the iris sometimes showed within like blue flames" (83),
while Nector says she watches him with "her eyes lit" (97).

Although she competes with Marie for Nector's attention through most of the novel, Lulu recognizes Marie's strength as that of the earth which gives life: "She swayed down like a dim mountain, huge and blurred, the way a mother must look to her just born child" (LM 236). Nector's first encounter with Marie reveals the power she draws from the earth. As he tries to take away a sheet he believes she has stolen from the convent, he finds himself unable to move her: "She is planted solid as a tree" (59). She knocks him down during their struggle and Nector is forced to admit that "Marie is the kind of tree that doubles back and springs up, whips singing" (59). Marie becomes mother to many characters in the novel, so many that she "had to pile the children in a cot at night. One of the babies slept in a drawer to the dresser" (63). June, a child Marie takes in, is more like her than any of her own, although in ways Marie does not realize. She comments that June "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" (65). But the woods are also in Marie, just as they are in June and Eli. The difference is that June is not able to draw strength from her relationship with the earth.

Eli's character is not fully developed in Love Medicine, but we do learn that "he hardly came out of the
woods . . . [h]e was like a shy animal himself when he got trapped in a house" (LM 125). Owens contends that Eli is "the one character who never loses touch with either earth or identity" (Other Destinies 195). When he first appears in the novel, Eli is dressed exactly like his brother, except that he is in "olive green" while Nector wears "navy blue" (LM 25). These color choices link the brothers to the elements which dictate their characters: Eli relates to the earth, Nector to water. Nector decides early in his adult life to "survive the raging water. I’d hold my breath when I hit and let the current pull me toward the surface, around jagged rocks" (91). Marie thinks of Nector’s lovemaking as a wave: "I rolled with his current like a stone in the lake. He fell on me like a wave. But like a wave he washed away" (72). Nector himself describes his affair with Lulu in the language of water:

I moved, witching water. I was full of sinkholes, shot with rapids. Climbing in her bedroom window, I rose. I was a flood that strained bridges. Uncontainable. I rushed into Lulu, and the miracle was she could hold me . . . unfolding in sheets and snaky waves." (100)

It is surprising that, although the river has great power, Nector is more like the calm water of a lake or stream. Lulu admits, "He had brains and heart to spare but never had to use them for himself. He never fought. So when his senses started slipping he just let them dribble out" (229). Nector’s identification with water gives him the flexibility
he thinks he needs to survive, to be pulled "around jagged rocks," but eventually this passivity allows his identity to be "smoothed away" (94), and he becomes a prisoner in the flowing stream of his own memories.

While water images surround Nector, they are not reserved for him. The central element of this novel is water, and Erdrich uses it to create a specific impression: "In Love Medicine the main image is the recurring image of the water--transformation (walking over snow or water) and a sort of transcendence" (Erdrich quoted in Wong 44). At the beginning of the novel, June "walked over it (the snow) like water and came home" (LM 6); at the end, her son Lipsha crosses the water to bring her spirit, embodied in a blue Firebird, home. As Marvin Magalaner points out, however, "Erdrich deals also in less cosmic terms with the image: the ability to shed tears or the curse of being unable to cry; the use of boiling water to exorcise the devil from young Marie’s body, the lack of rain" (97). Lulu’s moment of transformation comes after an eye surgery when she is nursed by Marie, who declares "Somebody had to put the tears into your eyes" (LM 235). In this simple statement Marie forgives Lulu for her affair with Nector and years of separation are transcended. Lulu acknowledges "For the first time I saw exactly how another woman felt, and it gave me deep comfort" (236). Marie forgave Nector years earlier
by reaching out across the space "like a fine lake between us . . . 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" (129).

Because these moments of compassion are described through water images, Crabtree concludes,

> Water, then, despite its potential for destructiveness, has links with a primal oneness which enriches and empowers those who are in harmony with nature. Water in its various forms is associated with unity, nurture and healing. (55)

At the same time, Trickster teaches us that the natural world is seldom so easily explained. Water can be destructive: June dies in an unexpected winter snow storm and Henry drowns in a river swollen by the spring thaw. Reflecting on stones at the bottom of a lake, Marie finds "no kindness in how the waves are grinding them smaller and smaller until they finally disappear (73). In Love Medicine, the water that polishes lake stones represents time, which polishes people, and for some characters time is destructive. Nector realizes that time has pulled him along and worn him away without his consent:

> So much time went by in that flash it surprises me yet. What they call a lot of water under the bridge. Maybe it was rapids, a swirl that carried me so swift that I could not look to either side but had to keep my eyes trained on what was coming. (93)

Time does not always have the healing properties associated with water in this novel. Lipsha learns this when he
observes the relationship between Nector and Marie: "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" (192). The passing years do not make love easier, they just leave less time to love.

Ironically, the relationship between Marie and Lulu is healed by time and by Nector’s death. They come to realize the similarities in their quests for love, identity, and family, a quest they share with all the individuals in *Love Medicine*. Some readers consider Erdrich’s use of multiple narrators a sign of fragmentation and disconnectedness in the characters’ lives. Yet while the characters do spend a great amount of time struggling to connect with each other, Lulu and Marie are evidence that those connections are eventually made. When we acknowledge these bonds, however weak they may be, the many individual stories now take on the intimate quality of gossip shared with a close friend. Readers are drawn into the characters’ lives and leave the novel believing in "the possibility of survival for native people, a survival of body and spirit" (Catt 72). Michael Dorris emphasizes choosing to focus "on the community. . . . in the daily lives of contemporary Indian people, the important thing is relationships, and family and history" (quoted in Jones 7). An individual may occasionally rage out about injustices American Indians have endured, as
Albertine does on her way home when she asserts "The policy of allotment was a joke. As I was driving toward the land, looking around, I saw as usual how much of the reservation was sold to whites and lost forever" (LM 11). Yet the novel never dwells on politics. Instead, it tells the stories and praises the efforts of those individuals who have had the strength to endure. By the end of the novel, these strong individuals are coming together to create a strong community.

Erdrich gives her characters power over their stories, and consequently the power to love, fight, hope, and survive, by allowing so many of them to speak in the first person. Storytellers become active participants in teaching the history of their families and the tribe to their children and anyone else who will listen. Discussing the role of myth in American Indian traditions, Allen explains that

the mythic heals, it makes us whole. For in relating our separate experiences to one another, in weaving them into coherence and therefore significance, a sense of wholeness arises, a totality which, by virtue of our active participation, constitutes direct and immediate comprehension of ourselves and the universe of which we are integral parts. (117)

The individual stories in Love Medicine come together to heal and make whole the characters of the novel. Through the power of these stories the novel transcends the boundaries of a classification like "Native American literature" and
becomes a bridge between Indian and non-Indian readers. It does not dismiss the differences between the cultures, but it allows those of us who are outside the narrative to connect with the characters on an individual level and to appreciate our similarities alongside the differences.
THE BEET QUEEN

The Beet Queen (1986) does not fulfill readers' expectations of another novel about Native Americans and their experiences. One reviewer notes that "the Native American element remains as only one flavor in a rich ragout of ordinary American types in a loose many-stranded tale" (Narveson, 118-119). Instead, The Beet Queen is about "men and women without reservations, hung out to dry on the flat, dull edge of the Minnesota-North Dakota heartland" (Owens Other Destinies 205).

It is correct to point out that, like Love Medicine, this novel does not focus on race relations. But criticisms of The Beet Queen's lack of Native American characters ignore that Erdrich does not set out to write polemical novels attacking American society or the treatment of American Indians. She writes about individuals and how they respond to adversity. On the North Dakota plains from 1932 to 1972, this includes American Indians, white settlers, and their descendants. The Beet Queen is like Love Medicine and Tracks in that Erdrich creates strong characters and allows them to tell their own stories. Because storytelling does not have a cultural role in the traditions of these individuals, their stories are told to the reader and not to each other. Despite the lack of shared stories and traditions, these characters find ways to
connect and to build new families and communities.

In a provocative study of *The Beet Queen*, Gretchen Bataille argues that readers have not appreciated the unique way Erdrich portrays Native American/white relations. Bataille believes that *The Beet Queen* explores the tension "in the history of the northern Plains" (279):

"The intrusion of white farmers and shopkeepers into the ancestral home of the Chippewa was followed by entrepreneurs such as Wallace Pfeff, promising economic revival and urbanization. In this way, *The Beet Queen* really *is* about American Indians in ways critics have ignored. *The Beet Queen* portrays the final chapter of the tension between the Indians and the intruders, and the result is a border community of alienated and distraught victims of history. (279-280)

Read in this way, *The Beet Queen* is not completely silent on the relationships between Native Americans and their white neighbors. Louis Owens considers Erdrich’s "refusal to foreground" the situation of Native Americans in the midwest one of the strengths of *The Beet Queen*:

Indian identity is not, however, at the heart of the novel, and cultural conflict here is never explicit; there is no overt racism, no jagged sense of lost Indian culture or identity. Everyone in *The Beet Queen* is in the same boat--Indian or white, hetero- or homosexual--and the boat is an emotional dinghy set adrift on the very mundane sea of mid-America, where the frailty of lives and relationships has never been more pronounced. (*Other Destinies* 206)

It should not be assumed, however, that, because it is not set on a reservation, *The Beet Queen* does not have a cultural voice; it is simply Erdrich’s German-American background speaking. Robert Narveson would argue that
characters in *The Beet Queen* "have shed all distinctive ethnic traits" (119) except for their names, but the "ordinary American types" Erdrich portrays are stereotypical Midwestern salt-of-the-earth individuals with a strong work ethic. Their heritage is familiar to us; it is their lives which we would not think of as "typical."

In the prologue, Karl Adare never makes it to the safety promised by his aunt’s butcher shop. He chooses instead to return to a train boxcar and begin a life of wandering, drifting "with no firm sense at all of his own identity" (Owens *Other Destinies* 207). Bataille observes that this sets the tone for the novel, and it is a series of images of separation. . . . Throughout the novel, characters separate, leave, or are abandoned, and each loss brings with it a renewed strength of endurance but also increased emotional retardation. (280)

We later learn that Karl and his sister Mary came to Argus in search of a stable family after their mother, Adelaide, abandons them and an unnamed new baby by flying away with a stunt pilot. When the baby is stolen, Mary and Karl are left with only each other and the knowledge of an aunt who owns a butcher shop.

While Mary is eventually taken in by her aunt’s family, she is both distrusted and envied by their daughter, Sita Kozka. After Mary steals Sita’s best friend, Celestine James, Sita feels her alienation from Argus and the people
in it is made complete. As an adult, Sita tries to break away permanently by moving to Fargo, North Dakota and becoming a model at a department store, only to find herself returning to Argus for the safety and security of marriage. Like her aunt Adelaide, Sita relies on her appearance to provide for her. While she eventually comes to understand the impermanence of beauty, Sita lacks the internal strength which would enable her to grow beyond her jealousy of Mary and become a part of the makeshift family which builds around Celestine’s daughter, Dot.

One night, as she is feeding Dot, Celestine notices a spider making a nest in the baby’s hair. As Celestine watches, "[i]t moved so quickly that it seemed to vibrate, throwing out invisible strings and catching them, weaving its own tensile strand. . . . A web was forming, a complicated house, that Celestine could not bring herself to destroy" (BO 158). The web this spider weaves to build its home is no less delicate or complex than the ties which connect Dot’s family. Mary, as Karl’s sister and Celestine’s closest friend, becomes both Dot’s aunt and godmother. Wallace Pfef, another of Karl’s lovers, is Celestine’s nearest neighbor and Dot is born on his new couch; consequently, she is named after him, Wallacete, and he becomes her godfather. In Karl’s absence, Wallace takes on the paternal role, while Mary, who clings to her "one tie
of kinship" (BQ 174) in Dot, often undermines Celestine's authority to become Dot's confidant and playmate.

Although family and community ties are reinforced at the end, several individuals--specifically Karl, Sita, and Adelaide--spend most of their lives avoiding those relationships. Erdrich uses flight to emphasize the many times characters are unable to connect, but it also reveals ways in which characters find themselves unexpectedly linked to others. Despite the weight of her responsibility as the mother of three young children, Adelaide Adare takes to the skies, an action which causes Bataille to conclude that The Beet Queen "is a novel where love literally flies away in the first chapter" (278). As a teenager, Dot recognizes the role flight has played in her past: "There is a thread beginning with my grandmother Adelaide and traveling through my father and arriving at me. That thread is flight" (BQ 300). By identifying flight as a thread, however, Dot changes the image from one of abandonment to one of connection. What begins as a way for her to flee her family and the embarrassment of being crowned Beet Queen in a contest rigged by Wallace--flying away in a crop duster--ends with an affirmation of the importance of that family. In the plane, Dot feels ill, "too light, unconnected" (301). When she returns and does not see her mother waiting "it is a lonely thought" (302). But Celestine is there, and they
go home together, Dot touching her mother's arm "for balance" as they walk (303).

Erdrich uses images of flight to portray air, the element central to the novel. But, despite those images, reading *The Beet Queen* with the prior knowledge Erdrich intended air to be its unifying element can be a frustrating experience. As early as the prologue, we are told that Mary's name is "square and practical as the rest of her"; when she moves, it is "solidly forward" (BO 1-2). The images of density and solidity which surround Mary are in sharp contrast to the expectations of weightlessness related to the idea of air. As other key characters are defined in terms of size--Celestine with her height and masculine build, Dot, "pale, broad, and solid"--they establish a contradiction and an opposition to images of flight and people set adrift. Through Sita's madness, even Karl, in some ways the most unattached character in the novel, sinks into the earth. His sales case "was so heavy, resting on his lap and knees, that his feet began to bury themselves in the earth and very swiftly the lawn rose to his knees" (138).

One might be tempted to speculate that gravity is the real natural force at work in the novel, but Erdrich manipulates the contrast between weight and weightlessness to enhance the imagery of moving air. It is Mary,
Celestine, and Dot with their apparent solidity and size; Wallace, with his position as a pillar of the community; Karl, burdened with the emotional scar tissue of an abandoned child; Celestine's brother, Russell Kashpaw, weighted down by the shrapnel of his war injuries; and Sita, restrained by her less than metropolitan upbringing, that Erdrich sets adrift in the world. Just as the "fierce" North Dakota wind moves tumbleweeds, Erdrich's characters are often sent tumbling by events in their lives. Fate appears in *The Beet Queen* as images of the unstoppable, unforgiving wind sweeping across the plain. For example, when Wallace Pfef attends a convention in Minneapolis, he meets Karl Adare and experiences his first homosexual encounter:

> I never knew it, had probably hidden it deep away, but I found the attraction as easy as breathing in and breathing out. And so it happened. And there I was, member of the Kiwanis, eating prime rib and accepting choice bits of game hen from the fork of another man. Sheer madness. Yet I felt amazed, as if the clouds had blown away, as if the bare bones were finally visible. I was queer. (144-45)

Bataille observes that "Erdrich shows us that these characters are controlled by a fate neither they nor the reader understand" (283). Celestine has a brief glimpse into this idea of fate: while Mary talks about "holes in space that suck everything into them," Celestine has a vision of "all of us sucked headlong through space. I see us flying in a great wind of our own rubber mats and
hairbrushes until we are swallowed up, with fearful swiftness, and disappear" (250-1).

Mary repeatedly tries to know her fate and that of others through tarot cards, palm reading, and yarrow sticks which "are supposed to tell what is going to happen in the short run" (BQ 106). Perhaps because of her unpredictable childhood, Mary is fascinated with the future, a fascination which seems to set The Beet Queen even further apart from Love Medicine and Tracks. The Euramerican tradition which thinks of the future as an orderly unchangeable entity perceives time as linear. Fate is working in these characters' lives, but not always in a linear way. While it can be strong like the wind, fate in The Beet Queen appears to be more like the air which surrounds us and is essential to life. Erdrich reworks the concept of linear time and an ordered future and builds in The Beet Queen a Native American perception of time through one of Mary's visions of the future. According to Catherine Rainwater:

Chronology yields to mythical timelessness again in Mary's trance vision and her subsequent formation of a spiritual tie with Celestine's baby, Mary's niece. As Mary "sees" the person the embryo will be, time speeds up and she sees an entire season elapse. (417)

Instead of limiting and structuring time, "Mary's prophetic dreams break down the notion of the sequentiality of time, and imply a standard of time based on simultaneity rather than linearity" (Rainwater 417). When Celestine has a
vision which calls her to Sita's home, she remarks, "the dream is more real than life to me" (BQ 238). This realization establishes a connection between the world of dreams and the physical world, and again connects The Beet Queen to an Indian world view.

The structure of the novel also reflects a Native American concern with continuation, rather than the Euramerican desire for resolution. When she comes back to Celestine, Dot "completes the novel's circular journey, repeating Adelaide’s flight but returning to where she began and belongs" (Owens Other Destinies 211-212). Emphasized by Dot's return, the lasting impression left by The Beet Queen is of the importance of strong relationships between individuals. Erdrich continues to create characters who survive to establish a sense of identity and community despite the forces opposing them. Narveson observes that, while characters in Love Medicine have "roots in their traditional past," in The Beet Queen, "they are instead bound together by family ties forged in the harsh unattractive terrain" (119). By working a fantastic reversal of the air imagery with its disconnected-ness, Erdrich is able to bring her characters and readers to a sense of completion and connection.

The Beet Queen, with its non-native characters who experience the world in ways that are sometimes very Indian,
challenges readers to broaden their definition of "Native American literature." Debra Holt comments that "the structure and content of [Erdrich’s] works reflect the paradoxical notion that in a changing universe, everything moves toward wholeness" (149). By telling the story of Indian/white interaction off the reservation, The Beet Queen rounds out Erdrich’s story of the North Dakota plains and is an important link between Love Medicine and Tracks. We see evidence of a Native American world view influencing the lives of white characters and, although they are marginal, we feel the presence of Eli Kashpaw, Sister Leopolda, and Fleur Pillager.
Tracks (1988) was the third novel of Erdrich's quartet to be published, but in many crucial ways it comes first. "It is the first manuscript I finished," she told an interviewer, "but I have since divided it up and re-used pieces of that manuscript elsewhere. . . . It is the form of all else, still a tangle" (quoted in Chavkin 238). Set in the early 1900's, Tracks brings readers into the world of the Chippewa before the reservation has become a way of life, while many members of the tribe are fighting the allotment act which will still upset Albertine Johnson two generations later. Unlike her experience writing Love Medicine, Erdrich began Tracks with the belief "It was Time to Write a Novel." She continues, "It was a search for a voice, a very serious, very ponderous novel" (quoted in Grantham 12). Although the published version bears little resemblance to the original 400-page manuscript, Tracks is still a serious novel. It is, as Louis Owens observes, "the most overtly political" (Other Destinies 215) of Erdrich's novels, but it is also the most rooted, through narrative style and central characters, in Chippewa tradition. As Jennifer Sergi (280) suggests, we cannot know how much Chippewa history Erdrich learned as a child and how much she acquired through academic research. The result of that knowledge, however, is a novel which is both historically--
detailing the effects of the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887--
and culturally accurate.

Erdrich acknowledges that *Tracks*, because of its
temporal and physical setting, is "bound to be more
political. There’s no way to speak about Indian history
without it being a political statement. You can’t describe
a people’s suffering without implying that somebody’s at
fault" (quoted in Schumacher 174). One of the appealing
features of *Tracks*, however, is that it does not make the
individual reader feel at fault\textsuperscript{11}. Erdrich allows even the
non-native reader to feel loss rather than guilt when the
logging company takes Fleur Pillager’s land. Although many
of Erdrich’s readers are descendants of those loggers and
other individuals who benefited from the tribe’s loss of
land during the allotment period, her writing does not put
us on the defensive. We are made to share in the pain of
the loss just as we would if it were happening to a close
friend. In this way, Erdrich excites readers’ sense of
injustice in ways no accusations ever could.

The politics of the novel are inextricably bound up in
its central element, earth. Several characters in the
novel--Fleur, Nanapush, Eli and Margaret Kashpaw--struggle
for the right to stay on and have access to their
traditional home-lands and hunting grounds. Other
characters, predominantly mixed-bloods like the Morrisseys
and Lazzares, profit from "acquiring allotments that many old Chippewa did not know how to keep" (T 63). Land is important to the novel not only as a source of imagery, but as the source of all action and motivation. Nancy J. Peterson notes:

> greed and desire divide the Anishinabeg, turning some, such as Bernadette Morrissey and Edgar Puckwan Junior, into 'government Indians,' while prompting others--Margaret and Nector--to look out for themselves at the expense of communal values. (987)

Conflict, therefore, also centers on the land, as does personal and cultural identity--and survival itself. In Tracks more than any of her other novels, Erdrich's decision to focus the imagery on one element truly brings cohesion to the characters' stories.

Nanapush and Fleur Pillager represent tradition in Tracks; they fight the hardest and the longest against the invasion of white ways and the assimilation of native peoples. Nanapush is the grandfather of Love Medicine's Gerry Nanapush, and their shared connection with the Trickster figure Nanabozho has been well documented\(^\text{12}\). Nanapush himself admits his father chose the name Nanapush "[b]ecause it's got to do with trickery and living in the bush" (T 33). Based on stories they collected from Ojibwa peoples along Leech Lake, Sister Bernard Coleman, Ellen Frogner, and Estelle Eich conclude that Nanabozho is a central character in Ojibwa mythology. He is "a powerful
manido or spirit being" who is always wandering about. He is always hungry, but he is never permitted to satisfy his hunger. He is always playing tricks on others, though his jokes usually turn on himself. . . . He is an elusive character, as he unites in himself the traits of a god, an animal, and even a human being. (56-58)

It was Nanabozho who gave the Ojibwa the Midewiwin, "the Midie religion or the Grand Medicine Society" (58). This is consistent with Nanapush’s role as healer in Tracks: he saves Fleur, Eli and himself from death, and saves Lulu’s feet from amputation. Coleman, Frogner, and Eich also document that Nanabozho was "mentioned as a brother to the animals, the plants, the trees, and the many different aspects of nature" (56). Thus, when the logging companies begin working around Matchimanito lake in Tracks, Nanapush also suffers: I heard the groan and crack, felt the ground tremble as each tree slammed earth. I weakened into an old man as one oak went down, another and another was lost" (9).

In addition to Nanapush’s representation of Trickster, the character of Fleur Pillager firmly connects this novel to Chippewa history. William Warren, in his History of the Ojibway People, devotes a chapter to describing the "Origin of the distinctive name of Pillagers applied to the Leech Lake band of Ojibways; and Era of the Smallpox" (256). He records that in 1781 the Ojibway band inhabiting the land around Leech Lake "became known by the distinctive appellation of 'Pillagers'" (256); their Ojibway name
translates to "men who take by force." The Pillager band became known as "the bravest band of the tribe" (256), and was composed primarily of the Bear and Catfish clans. By 1851, the census list estimated that there were 1,250 Pillagers living on Leech Lake (257). Warren goes on to document the outbreak of smallpox which spread through the Pillager band and was unknowingly spread by them to other Ojibway villages.

In Tracks Fleur and a cousin, Moses, are the only Pillager survivors after both the smallpox epidemic and then tuberculosis--what Father Damien calls "The consumption" (T 2)--ravage their band. Nanapush prides himself on being the one who "saved the last Pillager" (2), in spite of the unwillingness of other Chippewa to trespass on Pillager land and help him. Leech Lake becomes Matchimanito Lake in Tracks, a dangerous body of water that is "surrounded by the highest oaks, by woods inhabited by ghosts and roamed by Pillagers, who knew the secret ways to cure or kill" (2). Pauline Puyat tells us "Power travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth. It comes down through the hands, which in the Pillagers are strong and knotted, big, spidery and rough, with sensitive fingertips good at dealing cards" (31). Moses inherits the curing secrets and, although he isolates himself on an island in the lake and does not take part in tribal affairs, he has great influence on later
generations. Moses is the "Old Man Pillager" identified in Love Medicine as Lulu's first lover and the father of Gerry Nanapush. Despite his last name, Gerry's power comes to him "from Fleur, rather than Nanapush. . . . Gerry is thus even more than a 'Nanapush man'; he is a Pillager on both sides of his bloodline and passes this power on to Lipsha" (Owens Other Destinies 215).

Fleur possesses the secret ways to kill: she causes the death of the tribal police officer who does not give her family members a proper burial and it is rumored that three men lose their lives in exchange for hers, one for each time she drowns in Matchimanito. Pauline believes that Fleur summons a tornado to destroy the town of Argus and kill the men who raped her there. Fleur is also closely associated with Misshepeshu, the water monster who lives on the bottom of Lake Matchimanito. Many, including Nanapush, believe she can communicate with the monster and that she receives her power from it. Victor Barnouw records several stories about an underwater monster, described by some as an underwater lion, and as a horned snake by others. Two of Barnouw's stories tell of men who obtain powerful medicine from the water spirit. The first seeks bad medicine and uses the piece of flesh he cuts from under each horn as part of his medicine. It is said this man, like Fleur, could "just think that the person should die, and he would" (Barnouw
134). In the second story, another man also cuts some flesh from under the snake's horns. This man, however, "was good and said as he took the flesh that he didn't want to use it to harm anyone, but only to bring good luck in hunting, trapping, and so on" (135). The power of the manido, or spirit being, is generally neither good nor evil, it is simply power. How that power is used and who uses it gives it the characteristics of good or evil. Moses Pillager "gained protection from the water man, the lion in the lake" (T 36). Fleur controls the lake man, but she receives this power when she is "too young" and has "no stories or depth of life to rely upon. All she had was raw power" (7), which she uses to work her revenge on those who wrong her, but cannot summon to save herself or the tribe.

Like Fleur and Moses, who draw power from the spirit being in Matchimanito, most characters in Tracks are closely tied to the natural world. Like the older generation in Love Medicine, these characters' have personalities that reflect the connection to nature and are described in images of earth, water, and air. Whereas air was missing in Love Medicine, Tracks does not have a strong central character associated with fire. Consistent with Love Medicine's characterization, however, Lulu Nanapush--a minor character here--is associated with fire.

Pauline Puyat, a mixed-blood from a family of "skinners
in the clan for which the name was lost" (T 14), is described in terms of the elemental earth. It is fitting that Pauline, who ultimately denies having any Indian blood in order to join the Sacred Heart convent, is associated with the earth of the grave. Her choice represents the death of Chippewa tradition and the denial of her life-giving power as a woman. Unlike her illegitimate daughter--Marie Kashpaw, the mother figure for many in Love Medicine--Pauline resists giving birth: "I shook with the effort, held back, reduced myself to something tight, round, and very black clenched around my child so that she could not escape. I became a great stone, a boulder set under a hill" (135). Nanapush recognizes that Pauline is "good at easing souls into death but bad at breathing them to life," that she is "afraid of life in fact, afraid of birth" (57). In her crisis of identity, Pauline equates Christianity with death and believes that killing the old gods will make her more appealing to the Christian God. After killing Napoleon Morrissey, who she believes is the water monster in disguise, Pauline rolls in slough mud to cover her nakedness:

Then I stood. I was a poor and noble creature now, dressed in earth like Christ, in furs like Moses Pillager, draped in snow or simple air. God would love me better as a lily of the field, though no such flower as I had yet appeared on reservation ground. Again, again, on the way up the hill, I threw myself into the ditches. I rolled in dead leaves, in moss, in defecation of animals. (203)
Because she denies both her Indian identity and Chippewa traditions by becoming a nun and embracing the foreign religion and God of the Catholics to the exclusion of all else, Pauline becomes symbolic of the cultural death many Chippewa experienced.

Fleur’s association with Misshepeshu highlights her connection to water as an element. She is said to have "fishlike" hips and to move "[s]tealthily, smooth as an otter sliding from a log" (T 106) when she goes out to swim in Matchimanito. Beyond this Fleur, more than any other character, embraces each element which contributes to her personality. She maintains a connection to all the world around her, as Nanapush observes when Fleur cries out while giving birth:

it was as if the Manitous all through the woods spoke through Fleur, loose, arguing. I recognized them. Turtle’s quavering scratch, the Eagle’s high shriek, Loon’s crazy bitterness, Otter, the howl of Wolf, Bear’s low rasp. (59)

This relationship with both the spirit and human realms testifies to her commitment to the traditional ways. Just as the tribe traditionally did not seek to control or tame the land, earth as an element is manifest in Fleur through images of wildness: "Her braids were like the tails of animals, and swung against her when she moved, deliberately, slowly in her work, held in and half-tamed. But only half" (18). At times she is also described in images of fire.
Between Eli and Fleur "the air was busy, filled with sparks and glowing needles, simmering" (71), and Eli later comments that if "she brushed him by accident his skin felt scorched" (105). The one element not fully realized in Fleur is air. Air in *The Beet Queen* represented fate; in *Tracks* it represents speaking and storytelling. Although she can control the wind, Fleur is not a storyteller, and it is left to Nanapush to tell Lulu the story of her birth and of her mother’s love. Fleur, despite her strong ties to the past, cannot envision a place for herself in the tribe’s future and fades away at the end of the novel, leaving no tracks.

While images of air are not associated with Fleur, they are strongly linked to Nanapush. He is called by some an "[e]mpty old windbag" (T 112) and he dominates conversations, noting of his companion: "Occasionally, he took in air, as if to add observations of his own, but I pushed him under with my words"(7). In addition to his role as Trickster, Nanapush is the tribal storyteller. Erdrich allows Pauline to share with Nanapush in narrating the novel--an act Peterson considers "necessary to provide an 'indigenous' account of what happens in *Tracks*" (989)--but we soon learn that Nanapush’s words bring healing whereas Pauline’s cannot be trusted. While it must be admitted that Nanapush sometimes likes to tell stories just for the shock or embarrassment they will cause (T 123, 151) and admits
that he can "wound with pointed jokes" (117), his stories are as essential to the spiritual survival of the people and their traditions as air is to their physical survival. His words have life sustaining power: "During the year of sickness, when I was the last one left, I saved myself by starting a story... I got well by talking" (46). It is this oral tradition and the art of telling stories which Nanapush is trying to pass on to Lulu. In Tracks we read the story he tells her about her family. When Lulu suffers severe frostbite as a young child, he is able to heal her with his stories: "you lost yourself inside the flow of it, until you entered the swell and ebb and did not sink but were sustained" (167). He now hopes his stories will heal the rift between the adult Lulu and Fleur, "the one you will not call mother" (2).

Through the narration of Nanapush and Pauline, Erdrich gives voice to the varied ways in which American Indians respond to the changes in their world. Pauline suffers more than any other character in the novel, first because of her marginal status in the tribe and then because she decides to renounce even that connection. Peterson writes:

Pauline recognizes that indoctrination into white culture is a kind of mutilation... but she sees this development as inevitable. The white Christian capitalists will win the cultural-epistemological war, in Pauline's view, and she will side with the victor. (989)

The initial identity conflict Pauline experiences as a
mixed-blood intensifies her desire to find a place within a community. Although she envies Fleur, Nanapush, and the Kashpaws who form "a kind of clan, the new made up of bits of the old, some religious in the old way and some in the new" (T 70), Pauline wants to associate herself with those she feels have power. For her, this means the white nuns at the Catholic convent, a community of people who will allow her to join them and will treat her as an equal, even if they never fully accept her. Because she is allowed to tell her own story and to voice her opinion of other characters' actions, Pauline's experiences are legitimized, if not admired.

Pauline's desire to be white separates her from the tribal community. She makes a conscious choice between the old ways, represented by Fleur and Nanapush, and the new ways she learns at the convent. In most cases the lines are not so clearly drawn and Erdrich demonstrates how exposure to white ways at a young age can impair the way a child relates to the Indian community. While Eli is taught the old ways by Nanapush and avoids both classroom and church, his younger brother Nector "learned to write while he was no more than a child" and "served Mass for Father Damien" (T 39-40). Ironically, because of his classroom education, it is Nector who understands the bureaucracy of the Indian agency and saves the Kashpaw allotment:
he paid the money down on Kashpaw land from foresight, shrewdness, greed, all that would make him a good politician. As he grew older, he resembled Eli more in face and less in spirit. Whereas the elder brother never lost his tie to the past, the younger already looked ahead. (209)

Nector is forced to make a choice between his family and the community, or clan, which has built around Fleur. Eventually, choices like this wear away at Nector’s identity. While he may have the ability to look ahead and prepare himself for changes in the world around him, we know from Love Medicine that Nector’s mind retreats into a second childhood and away from those changes.

Fleur does not wait for a second childhood: pride in her heritage prohibits her from accepting and adapting to those changes even as she endures them. She prefers to live homeless rather than make a home somewhere other than on the land her family traditionally held. Nanapush, equally traditional in his beliefs and lifestyle, is nonetheless willing to learn and to use the government system to his advantage. Sidner Larson observes of Nanapush that "[a]lthough he is made to bend, he does not break, remaining perhaps the most empowered figure throughout the book" (8). Nanapush’s power comes through language, both the oral language of his people and the written language of the white men. While he does not give up storytelling nor doubt its power, Nanapush realizes "I should have tried to grasp this new way of wielding influence, this method of leading others
with a pen and piece of paper" (T 209). To retrieve Lulu from government boarding school, Nanapush does learn this new way: he becomes a bureaucrat, reaches through loopholes, and produces church records to prove that he is Lulu's father and has the authority to bring her home (225). Once she is home, Nanapush relies on his power as a storyteller to teach Lulu her heritage. His stories reaffirm the role of the spoken word in preserving tradition in spite of a world which seeks to make them "a tribe of file cabinets and triplicates, a tribe of single-space documents, directives, policy. A tribe of pressed trees" (225).

Fluent in the oral and written word, Nanapush broadens his influence as a storyteller by using both. Jennifer Sergi describes the storyteller as one who

takes what he or she tells from experience--his or her own or that reported by others--and in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to the tale. The storyteller relies on memory (his or hers and his or her listener's) and creates a chain of tradition that passes on a happening from generation to generation.

(279)

Nanapush's stories build this "chain of tradition," as he instructs Lulu who, in Love Medicine and The Bingo Palace, will become a strong, traditional voice for the tribe. Owens notes that Tracks "concludes with a sense that all the strings haven't been cut, that Indian people may yet be teased and tricked into self-knowledge and a more secure identity through the necessary storytelling" (Other
Destinies 217). In this, the most traditional of Erdrich’s novels, the stories expose the frailty of individual identity when it is not rooted in cultural identity or when it seeks to exist alone, without support. Nanapush admits, "I never made the mistake of thinking that I owned my strength. . . . And so I never was alone in my failures" (T 177). The strength of Erdrich’s own storytelling comes from her willingness to listen to the stories of her characters and of Chippewa tradition, and then to allow those voices to speak.
CONCLUSION

In *Tracks*, Nanapush says of Fleur Pillager, "she was the funnel of our history. As the lone survivor of the Pillagers, she staggered now beneath the burden of a life she was failing to deserve" (178). Fleur represents a way of living and thinking about the world which Nanapush realizes is being lost. Fleur realizes this also; her response is to resist the change, become rigid in her pride, and accept nothing but a return to traditional ways.

Nanapush’s response is to tell stories. Through what Louis Owens terms "the necessary storytelling" (*Other Destinies* 217), Nanapush seeks to preserve tribal identity and history for the generations who will come after him. Louise Erdrich continues this tradition of storytelling to retell and, therefore, record the experiences of prior generations. Her American Indian heritage is remembered in *Tracks* and her German-American heritage in *The Beet Queen*. With *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*, she begins a new cycle of stories to chronicle the experiences of her own generation. As a writer of Indian descent she is in the position, as was Fleur, to become a funnel of her culture’s history. Because she combines an awareness of Indian traditions with the art of storytelling, Erdrich is able to do what Fleur could not: bear the weight of those traditions. Erdrich shares the burden through stories and, consequently, is not crushed by
Erdrich's writing emphasizes the importance of storytelling to the continuation of tribal tradition. Not only do characters in these novels tell stories, the novels themselves are structured around those stories. In this way, Erdrich achieves continuity and does not lose the power of the spoken word. Paula Gunn Allen writes, "The oral tradition is vital; it heals itself and the tribal web by adapting to the flow of the present while never relinquishing its connection to the past" (45). By altering the non-native genre of the novel, Erdrich is able to convey a sense of the oral tradition. At the same time, she adapts that tradition to reflect the reality of the loss of many oral storytellers and the physical distance between individuals which makes such storytelling difficult.

Through her novels, and, in particular, the character of Nanapush, Erdrich demonstrates the power of storytelling to teach and heal. Characters in *Tracks* and *Love Medicine* utilize the power in stories and in the act of sharing stories to teach the young their heritage and to heal rifts in families. In *The Bingo Place* and *The Beet Queen* the characters do not place such an emphasis on storytelling, but there is still an effort to connect to the past and to other individuals. Yet, while they may not all foreground storytelling, these novels are all part of a storytelling
cycle. Read in the order of their publication—Love Medicine, The Beet Queen, Tracks, and The Bingo Palace—they form a circle of time which takes us back in history while it prepares us to move forward in the present. The story begins, reaches into the past to build a more solid foundation, then comes back to the original characters and continues with their stories. But a thematic connection is built when the novels are read in chronological order. Moving from Tracks through The Beet Queen and Love Medicine, and ending with The Bingo Palace, the novels detail a way of thinking about the land. In Tracks, where members of the tribe are still fighting to save their allotted parcels of land, Nanapush tells Lulu, "Land is the only thing that lasts life to life. Money burns like tinder, flows off like water. And as for government promises, the wind is steadier" (T 33). Characters in The Beet Queen and Love Medicine pay little attention to the land, except to hope that it will yield enough at harvest to meet expenses or to notice how little of it now belongs to the tribe. Land returns to the center of conflict in The Bingo Palace as Lyman Lamartine looks for a place to build his bingo palace. When he decides on Fleur Pillager’s land around Lake Matchimanito she appears to him in a dream to admonish him in Nanapush’s words: “Land is the only thing that lasts life to life. Money burns like tinder, flows off like
water, and as for the government’s promises, the wind is steadier" (BP 148).

As Erdrich’s novels connect through cycles of time and meaning they establish themselves as Native American novels, even if their form or content may at times reflect more Euramerican traditions. In an attempt to explain what constitutes Native American writing, Allen concludes that the novels are

ritualistic in approach, structure, theme, symbol, and significance, even though they use an overlay of western narrative plotting. They are the novels most properly termed American Indian novels because they rely on native rather than non-Indian forms, themes and symbols. . . . they carry on the oral tradition at many levels, furthering and nourishing it and being furthered and nourished by it. (79)

Of Erdrich’s quartet, The Beet Queen and The Bingo Palace are the least overtly Indian; the first contains almost no Indian characters while the second places an unusual emphasis on one person’s story. Nonetheless, they exhibit an Indian world view which goes beyond simply being written by a Native American or having Indian characters. Just as Pauline Puyat’s story is an authentic piece of the Indian experience, these two novels give depth to the story Erdrich is telling. The story is always in process, always changing. With the publication of an expanded version of Love Medicine, Erdrich acknowledges that, even when published, a story is never really finished.
NOTES

1 While "Native American" is the more accepted term in academia, there is no consensus among the indigenous tribal peoples of the United States regarding the use of "Native American" or "American Indian." For the purposes of this paper, I will use the two interchangeably, but will refer to the characters in Erdrich's novels as American Indians or Indians because that is how they refer to themselves.

2 Erdrich usually uses the more modern name "Chippewa" to refer to native peoples who use the Anishinaabe language and that is the name I will use throughout this paper in reference to Erdrich and her characters. For a detailed discussion of the uses of the names "Chippewa" and "Anishinaabe," see Gerald Vizenor, The People Named the Chippewa, pages 13 through 16, and The Everlasting Sky, "Forward" and "The Sacred Names Were Changed."

3 Erdrich is of German-American and Chippewa descent and is a member of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Tribe.

4 Erdrich and Dorris have developed a unique literary relationship in which each acts as a collaborator and editor for the other's writing. Although most pieces are published as either Erdrich's or Dorris's--exceptions being Crown of Columbus and Route 2 which appeared with both names--both are deeply involved in the process of preparing the manuscript. In Dorris's words: "We edit it together. We
go over every word and achieve consensus on every word; basically we agree on every word when its finally finished" (Coltelli 28). They have also worked together on stories published in England under the pen name Milou North (a combination of Michael and Louise, and a reference to where they live).

5 Quotations from Erdrich’s novels will be cited parenthetically in the text. When the source of the citation may not be clear, the name of the novel will be indicated by using the following abbreviations: LM for Love Medicine, BQ for The Beet Queen, T for Tracks, and BP for The Bingo Palace.

6 For tribal stories regarding passion and sexual appetite, see Erdoes and Ortiz. It must be admitted that Erdrich lays the ground work for this transition from the more traditional role of fire in Tracks when Nanapush’s father tells him: "The first Nanapush stole fire. You will steal hearts" (33).

7 The guard further desecrates the pipe when he carries it around his desk "counter-clockwise" (BP 35). Coleman, Frogner, and Eich, in Ojibwa Myths and Legends, describe the proper ritual for a ceremonial pipe: "The Ojibwa first pointed the stem to the east and then he repeated the ceremony for each of the other directions, continuing the clockwise order" (118) (my emphasis).
Coleman, Frogner, and Eich describe Nanabozho as the "central character in Ojibwa tales" (55). One of the tribe members they interviewed identified Nanabozho as "an ordinary Indian and an Indian extraordinary" (56). Gerald Vizenor, in *The People Named the Chippewa*, also writes about Naanabozho (his spelling) and the characteristics of this woodland trickster who "wanders in mythic time and transformational space between tribal experiences and dreams" (4).

See also Barry and Prescott, page 132.

Barry and Prescott further note that "through Nector and Eli, Erdrich is reworking the familiar native American motif of twins as complements and competitors" (125).

Louis Owens comments on this same attribute in *Love Medicine*: "the non-Indian reader is not made to feel acutely, as he or she is in other Indian novels, a sense of responsibility for the conditions portrayed. . . . Erdrich's first novel does not make the white reader squirm with guilt" (*Other Destinies* 204).

See Catherine Catt, pages 72-74; Debra Holt, page 154; Jennifer Sergi, page 280; and Margie Towery, page 104.
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