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## **Shifting Stability: Identity in the World of Louise Erdrich**

Karah M. Mitchell

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Shifting Stability: Identity in the World of Louise Erdrich

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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## *Introduction*

Louise Erdrich has established herself as one of the most important American authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Much of her work openly engages issues that face contemporary Native Americans, and for this reason she contributes a necessary viewpoint to American literature; through her work, she gives a voice to those who have been, for the most part, largely ignored, cast off onto reservations where they face poverty, poor health care, racism, high infant mortality rates, and overall anonymity and neglect in the land of their ancestors. But even as Erdrich encounters these horrible realities, she also crafts a compelling vision of life through her characters, one that derives from a respect for Native traditions, meaningful human relationships, and the multi-dimensional natural world. The Native characters who tap into these aspects of life find their own way to survive—physically and spiritually—while characters who cast off Native values ultimately experience a destruction of any sense of self.

Yet depicting and understanding the importance of remaining true to one's Native heritage even while encountering an opposing worldview—that of Anglo-Europeans, or white Americans—is hardly an easy matter to grapple with. Such questions as, “What does it mean for Native American culture to survive?” or “How can Native Americans in today's world live happy, fulfilling lives while remaining rooted in their heritage?” are, quite frankly, difficult to answer. Erdrich's work is so resonant and compelling because she does not at all skirt these issues but faces them head-on through the travails of many unforgettable characters. By crafting an oeuvre dominated by diverse individuals Erdrich lends a subjective richness and complexity not only to her writing but also to the larger issues which it whole-heartedly engages.

This focus on developing separate characters who directly speak to us allows Erdrich to connect to the reader and allows her audience to understand the effects certain policies and actions

in the Ojibwe community have upon her narrators. But this individualistic focus only contributes to her larger focus on the interconnectivity of lives within the larger community. In one stroke Erdrich underlines both the individual and the larger whole of which that individual is but a small, seemingly insignificant part; she grapples with the realities that face those of full and partly Native American descent, from the social realities of the ever-changing world to their own inner psychological worlds which they must face every moment. In Erdrich's work, the individual identity becomes enmeshed within a larger network of identities and a larger socio-historic context as well; because of this defining feature, her work can be productively viewed under a post-modern/post-structuralist lens. Such a lens allows us to see the complex nature of identity and the many factors that contribute to it; it also helps us to see the relative nature of identity as well as of our own cultural notions.

Native American literature—including that of Erdrich—has been quite frequently interpreted through this theoretical standpoint. Gerald Vizenor—an Anishinaabe writer, critic, and literary scholar—himself champions this approach: “The word *postmodernism* is a clever condition: an invitation to narrative chance in a new language game and an overture to amend the formal interpretations and transubstantiation of tribal literatures” (4). Native literature has been all too often interpreted through an Anglo-European understanding; to think in terms of postmodernism, indeed, allows us “to amend [such] formal interpretations” that merely change Native words from one substance—their original one—into one tinted by another outside culture. (This applies particularly to the “transubstantiation” of the oral tradition into the written word.) Through the lens of postmodernism we can come to a better understanding of tribal literature in the sense that we come to comprehend it not through the medium of a Western-derived Anglo-European point of view but rather through a medium that profoundly questions and deconstructs our prevailing cultural notions. A postmodern stance helps us to realize the relative nature of truth as well as the relativity of identity itself; through this mode of thinking we can come to recognize that our own

cultural base of meaning-making is one of many kinds of meaning-making in the history of the world, not the one that necessarily embodies the truth.

In his foundational 1968 essay, “Différance,” Jacques Derrida lays the foundational concepts that he believes make thought and understanding possible; this essay shows how we constitute ourselves and our perception of reality as a result of a network of mere differences—not transcendent truths or identities. He tells us, “Différance is the nonfull, nonsimple ‘origin’; it is the structured and differing origin of differences” (286). It is a mode of understanding which “makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be ‘present,’ appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element” (287). The word “relation” is particularly key, for it underlines the dependency of each element on another element; “signification [is] possible” via such a system of fluctuating, dynamic interlocking of identities.

This mode of understanding itself happens to be applicable to—and evident within—Erdrich’s writing specifically and Native American literature generally, for in Native cultures the emphasis on interconnectivity necessitates a mode of signification wherein individual borders per se do not exist, for there are only individual borders if they mesh with outside borders, whether they be of other people, spirits, animals, plants, or other realities. Paula Gunn Allen puts it this way: “The purpose of traditional American Indian literature is never simply pure self-expression. . . . The tribes seek—through song, ceremony, legend, sacred stories (myths), and tales—to embody, articulate, and share reality, to bring the isolated, private self into harmony and balance with this reality, to verbalize the sense of the majesty and reverent mystery of all things, and to actualize, in language, those truths that give to humanity its greatest significance and dignity” (55). Through the word, then, the self becomes intertwined with a greater reality outside of itself; indeed, according to Native thought, the

word helps us to understand the relative dependence of this self. Such a conception of the word highlights the need for interconnection within the community. Erdrich's writing effects this same purpose, for she draws substantially from her own Ojibwe Native traditions.

The link between Erdrich's writing and postmodern expression is not new to this thesis. Many scholars have written well-articulated and illuminating studies of Erdrich using a postmodern stance. Additionally, most studies have focused on Erdrich's full-blood and mixed-blood Indian characters and the cultural problems that they face. In particular, Allan Chavkin, Annette Van Dyke, Connie A. Jacobs, and Catherine Rainwater have contributed important and often-cited critical essays on Erdrich's work, most of them developed from a postmodern perspective. The most cited essay I have found to date is Rainwater's "Reading Between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich" (1990). Her focus on the conflicting cultural "codes" so prevalent in Erdrich's work appears to have influenced the majority of essays devoted to analyzing both her novels and her poetry. This same conflict informs several key books that aim to help readers understand Erdrich's (often difficult) work, including Peter G. Beidler and Gay Barton's comprehensive *A Reader's Guide to the Novels of Louise Erdrich* (which comes fully equipped with a detailed—and overwhelmingly complex—family tree of many of Erdrich's characters) and *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Louise Erdrich*, edited by Greg Sarris, Connie A. Jacobs, and James Richard Giles. Recently, Deborah L. Madsen has edited an insightful collection of essays focused on *Tracks*, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, and *The Plague of Doves*, and only last year, Frances Washburn published a fresh, accessible work on Erdrich titled *Tracks on a Page: Louise Erdrich, Her Life and Her Works*. It seems that the critical discussion of Erdrich's work is in no danger of dwindling.

During the research phase for this thesis I did indeed discover many sources that helped me to better understand and appreciate the complexity of Erdrich's work; however, even as I came to this fuller understanding I also began to feel a growing need for a specific conceptual framework

that would illuminate her foundational ethos. This need originated with my perplexity when reading Erdrich's work for not only the first but also the second (and sometimes the third) time; even as I was deeply moved by her beautiful, poetic writing and her vivid portrayal of her characters I could not help but grapple with the confusion I felt even as I recognized my own love for and appreciation of her works. This confusion resulted from the complex nature of her characters; I found myself often wondering about the extent of each character's life in relation to other characters, places, plants, animals, and mythological creatures. I became acutely aware that Erdrich's work emphasizes community, indeed, but also that on a deeper level it points our attention to the insufficiency and incompleteness of isolated identities, particularly those that become isolated or alienated from their own blood heritage. Hence her most memorable and powerful characters are those who "stay true" to their heritage and their community. But while this was made clear to me, I could not help but remain uncertain about the nature of identity as depicted in her work; I asked myself, "Is there no such thing as identity in Erdrich's world? But then why is it composed of identities in the form of different characters? Does she at all reconcile individual identity with the recognition that one cannot exist alone, that one gains his or her life from other identities? Why does Erdrich even focus on dependent relations at all? What is Erdrich trying to tell us?"

I am grateful to my thesis director, J. Gerald Kennedy, for mentioning Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject to me at one of our (many) discussions. After reading her book-length essay on abjection, *Powers of Horror*, I was able to re-visit and re-think Erdrich's writing in a way that clarified much of my perplexity. Before I began reading Kristeva's essay I was admittedly somewhat skeptical about the possibility that I would even use it in my search to understand Erdrich; much of this skepticism originated with the title, for I could not help but think that Erdrich's writing is anything but horrifying. Additionally, I was hesitant to utilize a specific (non-Native) theoretical framework in the first place due to my desire to present Erdrich's writing without diminishing the



beauty and power of her own words, characters, settings, and themes. I did not want to simply say that she is actually a feminist, for example, and neglect to focus on the vital Native traditions that so inform her writing; however, I knew that Erdrich as a contemporary, university-educated writer cannot help but remain in conversation with theoretical standpoints. In other words, she herself has stepped out of the Native tradition of oral storytelling by virtue of her own pen and page even as she simultaneously draws on this tradition.

Despite these initial concerns, Julia Kristeva's essay on abjection proved to be the perfect tool for clarifying my thinking when reading Erdrich. While the language of her essay is certainly difficult and abstruse, the core of her argument, I find, is quite simple—but revelatory nonetheless. On the most basic level, Kristeva points our attention to a phenomenon that occurs every day and has occurred for centuries in the Western world: we view certain things with disdain and therefore we separate ourselves from them, casting them off in order that we may remain unpolluted by their disgracing effect. We view the world in terms of categories, and therefore we constantly use borders to separate reality into component parts so that we may understand it and exert some form of control over it and therefore over our own destinies. We find the blending of borders to be a threat to our own ordered view of ourselves and the world, our own categorization of things. To discover that one's sense of self and one's orderly view of the world are merely illusive and based out of a fear of the greatness of being itself is to experience a "power of horror."

Kristeva's theoretical approach is informed by a sophisticated psychological understanding profoundly influenced by Sigmund Freud; however, it surpasses Freud's explanations of the subconscious and the conscious in that it goes beyond the speaking/thinking/feeling subject. Kristeva's essay seeks to enunciate what appears to be *the* ultimate foundations of being itself, a place where nothing is differentiated and on top of which (and in defiance of which) we build our own epistemological structures. Kristeva puts this idea of opposing realms quite succinctly early on

in her essay: “To each ego its object, to each superego its abject” (2). The ego, or, simply put, the individual subject, is confronted by objects (and this is how one differentiates one’s self from everything else), and the superego, or that portion of us that is culturally-inculcated and thus which contributes to us a mode of understanding and meaning-making, is confronted by the abject—that which “lies . . . quite close, but . . . cannot be assimilated,” that which reveals the underlying “*want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded” (1, 5). The abject “disturbs identity [in the strictly separationist sense], system, [and] order,” it is “the impossible real,” and it “is above all ambiguity”: in short, it overwhelms us and threatens what Kristeva terms the “clean and proper self,” that is, the self who believes that he or she can be rid of dependencies, of the meshing of his or her boundaries with another (4, 9, 11, 101). This especially ties into the maternal/the feminine in that women represent the capacity for this boundary-meshing through their ability to harbor developing life. Woman provides a space wherein her own borders of selfhood mingle with those of the life within her; additionally, she gives physical life to us, and, with life, death. In that sense she controls, to some extent, our own destinies. In this way, she represents an abject space, one which moves and breathes beyond our control and within which we all came to be.

It is my hope that this thesis will help readers of Erdrich to understand how she encounters abjection as revealed by Kristeva’s important essay; this writing of abjection into her work, I believe, takes the form of her representation of powerful characters whose own identities depend upon other characters and outside entities as well as her ability to portray a people so commonly cast-off onto reservations in a way that emphasizes their own important identity as a whole and as individuals. Additionally, her abundance of powerful female characters redefines our notions of the primacy and power of Woman. My focus on several key recurring characters in Erdrich’s oeuvre derives from my desire to reveal the importance of understanding Native American identity as a dependency, not as a strictly autonomous entity; while I will focus primarily on characters of full-

blood and mixed-blood descent, I will also devote some time to Agnes DeWitt, a white woman but one who nevertheless embraces the religion of the Ojibwe people to whom she is supposed to minister, for I believe she serves as an example of Erdrich's representation of the ultimately healing capacity of allowing one's self to recognize his or her own dependency upon those things beyond his or her control.

The Ojibwe of Erdrich's own personal heritage represent just one of many Native tribes who have undergone some form of marginalization by white Anglo-Europeans. Erdrich's work is extraordinary in that she gives this heritage a voice that is accessible to many and that bespeaks of the Native importance placed on interconnectivity and community. Through her many memorable characters she reveals the importance of recognizing one's Native heritage even as he or she faces the modernizing world; she allows us to see the importance of these origins and the need for her characters to remember these origins and live through them, to face them every day. Only through incorporating one's self into his or her Native heritage can one come to a sense of identity.

Erdrich's characters who achieve any sense of identity enact this reality; thus, through "the abjection of self," or "recognition of the *want*," of the need for integrating one's being into a larger whole—into a heritage—can these characters know who they are, where they come from, and where they are going (5).

## *Chapter One*

### *The Sacred and the Mundane: The Highs and the Lows All Wrapped Up Together in One Unique Vision of Life*

“What is the essence, the soul? my Jesuit teachers used to ask of their students. What is the irreducible? I answer, what the owl pukes.” –Nanapush, *Four Souls*

#### ***Sacred (Re)Configurations***

Erdrich’s writing reveals an acute sense of the sacred and the mundane not as mutually exclusive, separate entities but rather as one living, breathing composite; traditional Western conceptions of the sacred as existing apart from the mundane do not apply to her writing, and it is for this reason that it is sometimes perplexing for the average reader. (I have opted to use the word “mundane” instead of “profane” in that I wish to emphasize the *physicality* and the *everydayness* of that which Western thought generally juxtaposes against sacred, holier elements within religion.) In her essay titled “Reading between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich,” Catherine Rainwater makes the observation that “Erdrich’s texts represent extreme cases of code conflict”—that of white Western society and that of Native American society (406). She continues, “Frustration of narrativity produces the reader’s own liminal experience and thus underscores Erdrich’s primary theme,” which, Rainwater believes, is not only “liminality and marginality” as it applies to many of her characters but also as it applies to her readers; by “paus[ing] ‘between worlds’” the reader “discover[s] the arbitrary structural principles of both” (406, 422). I would like to point out that not only do two competing worldviews marginalize the reader but also the Native American conception of the sacred and the mundane as Erdrich writes it into her works also marginalizes the reader; furthermore, this marginalization occurs as a result of the seeming lack of margins between the spirit world and everyday physical reality.

Our need to separate sacred and mundane elements encounters difficulties as we read her work, for she seems to have no such notion of their divided existence. Just one moment of this conception of their unity occurs in one of her poems in her celebrated collection of poetry, *Baptism of Desire*. In a series of poems titled “The Sacraments,” Erdrich redefines the traditional Western sense of sacred elements. “Baptism,” “Communion,” “Confirmation,” “Matrimony,” “Penance,” “Holy Orders,” and “Extreme Unction” widely depart from their respective Western definitions; however, this departure from Western beliefs about the sacred does not at all weaken the profound sense of sanctity that one gathers from these poems.

In “Communion,” the speaker does not experience the sacred by incorporating the Eucharist but rather by incorporating a mundane scene out in nature. She tells us,

It is spring. The tiny frogs pull  
their strange new bodies out  
of the suckholes, the sediment of rust,  
and float upward, each in a silver bubble  
that breaks on the water’s surface,  
to one clear unceasing note of need.

Sometimes, when I hear them,  
I leave our bed and stumble  
among the white shafts of weeds  
to the edge of the pond.  
I sink to the throat,  
and witness the ravenous trill  
of the body transformed at last and then consumed  
in a rush of music.

*Sing to me, sing to me.  
I have never been so cold  
rising out of sleep. (19)*

The speaker experiences the sacrament of communion not by taking part in the ritual of the Eucharist but rather by simply witnessing the transformation of tadpoles into frogs. The transformational power of nature becomes the means through which the speaker partakes of the sacred body of creation. The tadpoles are small, “tiny,” “strange,” and seemingly insignificant

creatures, but the speaker communes with the sacred—opens herself up to it—by watching this mundane phenomenon of their physical transformation. She knows “the ravenous trill” that only sacred communion can provide by literally and figuratively immersing herself in this transforming scene. This poem erases any border existing between the mundane and the sacred: the sacred inheres in the mundane and the mundane inheres in the sacred—they are not mutually exclusive but rather coexist in an endless cycle wherein transformation constantly takes place and therefore the sacred always occurs. Nature is dynamic, and so too is the sacred, for both depend upon one another for expression. By making this known to readers the speaker thus transforms our perception of the partaking of the sacred.

This same binding of separate worlds (at least in the light of Western thought) occurs in Erdrich’s novels. The Native awareness of the sacred interconnectivity of all life lives on in Lulu Nanapush Lamartine, a woman often labeled as man-hungry and sexually inclined, to say the least; the sacredness of land becomes apparent as we read about Fleur Pillager, perhaps Erdrich’s most memorable character; Nanapush embodies an awareness of the sacred elements tied to traditional beliefs by telling stories and thus by sharing this awareness. Characters commonly labeled as rejects—abjected, cast-off—nonetheless participate in the sacred; creatures who are ambiguous in form, such as the underwater lynx monster, Misshepesu (a mythological figure in Ojibwe tradition), play a role in the sacred; and characters who are in some way associated with other objects—even to the extent that they take on some significant characteristic of that object—are the ones who hold the most power and are most connected to indigenous notions of sacredness.

Kristeva’s discussion of the abject and the sacred applies to Erdrich in the sense that Erdrich takes things commonly believed to be abject and not only incorporates them into the sacred but also reveals them to be an intrinsic component of this dimension; her poem “Communion” represents this unique awareness, for a mundane scene in nature evokes a sense of communing with the

sacredness of being. According to Kristeva, the abject is always “quite close, but it cannot be assimilated,” for it is due to the abject that we are able to set up our own structures of meaning at all; in other words, it is the opposite against which one may define one’s own self (1). Kristeva’s account of how the child originates in a state of abjection ultimately points our attention to the “sacred configuration” that is the clean and proper self “edged by the abject”; she makes clear that it is *only* due to the abject that this sacredness becomes a reality at all (6). She writes,

Abjection accompanies all religious structurings and reappears, to be worked out in a new guise, at the time of their collapse. . . . Abjection appears as a rite of defilement and pollution in the paganism that accompanies societies with a dominant or surviving matrilinear character. It takes on the form of the *exclusion* of a substance (nutritive or linked to sexuality), the execution of which coincides with the sacred since it sets it up. (17)

The abject thus “sets . . . up” the sacred; a “sacred configuration” is, in fact, so highly revered because it appropriates the abject to a space in which it is excluded. Kristeva rightly draws our attention to the sacred’s dependence upon the abject. In a counterintuitive moment, she makes clear that such a rejected, cast-off space as the abject is the means through which the sacred—our notion most removed from the abject—comes to exist at all.

Kristeva goes on to note that “[a]bjection persists as *exclusion* or taboo (dietary or other) in monotheistic religions, Judaism in particular, but drifts over to more ‘secondary’ forms such as *transgression* (of the Law) within the same monotheistic economy.” In Christianity, “[the abject] finally encounters, with Christian sin, a dialectic elaboration, as it becomes integrated in the Christian Word as a threatening otherness—but always nameable, always totalizeable” (17). Although she refers most frequently to Christianity, Kristeva does not deny that the abject plays a role in the concept of the sacred for all religions; because the abject “sets up” the sacred, it has been the mission of religion in general to make holy, or to purify, the abject: “The various means of *purifying* the abject—the various catharses—make up the history of religions,” for the sacred has the capability of overpowering and making “pure” that which is cast-off, that which is abject (17).

Kristeva points out that it is art that provides the fundamental base of religions, for the ultimate purification of the abject, she argues, is attributable only to art. She continues, “Seen from [this] standpoint, the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity. That is perhaps why it is destined to survive the collapse of the historical forms of religions” (17). Art, Kristeva argues, embodies “the essential component of religiosity” precisely because it is “rooted in the abject” even while it “purifies” the abject; it is able, as it were, to create a meaningful structure over the abject only by being “rooted” within it, only by in fact owing its very foundations to it.

Just as the sacred can only exist because there is the abject, so too can art only exist because there is both the sacred and the abject; just as the “sacred configuration” only exists when it is “edged by the abject,” so too can the abject only be inscribed outside the boundaries of the sacred: as Kristeva herself declares, “outside of the sacred, the abject is written” (17). In the place where “the abject is written”—“a world in which the Other has collapsed”—exists an “aesthetic task—a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct—[that] amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless ‘primacy’ constituted by primal repression” (18). It is *only* by being fully in such an experience that “‘subject’ and ‘object’ push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again—inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject” (18). I would like to emphasize that such an experience not only exists “at the boundary of what is assimilable [and] unthinkable” but that it also distorts boundaries and creates its own inscription because of this distortion; the malleability of boundaries creates the unsettled nature that is such an intrinsic part of the abject. Thus, Fleur Pillager’s malleable nature as both human and animal would be considered abject because it cannot be assimilated into a boxed-in, specific group. Nanapush’s conflation of spiritual elements and physical realities would also be considered abject for this same reason.



It is the unsettling nature of the abject that Kristeva most strongly points out in the whole of her essay; after all, she does title it *Powers of Horror*. If the abject strikes horror into us precisely because it embodies a space where all is ambiguous, fluid, and outside of cultural norms then it is the duty of the sacred to provide a space that is not merely the opposite of that which is abject but that which cannot be touched—and therefore defiled by—the abject; it enacts a “safe” space that one envisions far removed from worldly things with all their propensities for corruption. Kristeva, however, does question such a simple idea of the sacred by pointing us to the common linkage of sacrifice with the sacred in chapter 3, “From Filth to Defilement.” She makes the observation that “[i]n psychoanalysis as in anthropology one commonly links the sacred and the establishment of the religious bond that it presupposes with *sacrifice*” (56). Kristeva goes beyond Freud’s idea of the sacred and taboo and totemism by drawing our attention to the role of the abject in such a discussion. She asks,

Could the sacred be, whatever its variants, a two-sided formation? One aspect founded by murder and the social bond made up of murder’s guilt-ridden atonement, with all the projective mechanisms and obsessive rituals that accompany it; and another aspect, like a lining, more secret still and invisible, non-representable, oriented toward those uncertain spaces of unstable identity, toward the fragility—both threatening and fusional—of the archaic dyad, toward the non-separation of subject/object, on which language has no hold but one woven of fright and repulsion? (57-58)

Kristeva’s discussion of the sacred thus leads us to believe that the sacred is both outside of and exists only due to the abject and that the abject also plays a vital role in the sacred because it somehow seeps its way into it, not necessarily threatening it but upholding it. This is the “archaic dyad” which has been with mankind since its beginnings. Kristeva declares of this dyad, “One aspect is defensive and socializing, the other shows fear and indifferenciation” (58). As different as both are, however, they uphold one another in our minds; we defend ourselves from fear only to realize, in the midst of our socializing, our true indifferenciation; again, such a realization is meant to be both enlightening and horrifying. It is meant to show us how, ignore it as we may, the abject

fundamentally contributes to our highest belief in purity, in separation from the abject, that is the sacred.

But Native American religious thought in general openly encounters the abject in the sense that it emphasizes not separation but rather incorporation; it emphasizes interdependencies in the natural world, for example, whereas Christianity is more abstract through its emphasis on a spiritual realm outside of this world. In his landmark work *Custer Died for Your Sins*, Vine Deloria, Jr. devotes an entire chapter to the “religious vacuum” that, for the Native American, Western religious viewpoints represent. Whereas Christianity separates elements of life into distinct, defined spheres, Native American “[r]eligion [is] an undefined sphere of influence in tribal society” (103). Because it is so undefined “there [are] no distinctions made between religion and life’s other activities by the Indian people”; because religion is so inextricably linked to all aspects of life, it is a true living religion with a physical counterpart (105). Deloria remarks that Christianity was and is the exact opposite of tribal religions—that it “fights unreal crises which it creates by its fascination with its own abstractions” (119). Christianity’s “abstractions” emphasize a realm *outside of* this world, not a realm that inheres within this world; Native religion—including the Ojibwe religious belief system upon which Erdrich draws—emphasizes a spiritual realm that exists *within* and depends upon this physical reality. This is Deloria’s point when he declares, “In a very real sense . . . Christianity replaced living religions with magic”; Christianity is full of “sterile dogmas” because it emphasizes another world, not this one, which to “the unstructured Indian psyche” moves and breathes within a fundamentally powerful spiritual force (105). Thus Christianity creates a strict structuration of the sacred and the mundane whereas Native thought does not.

Paula Gunn Allen points out this same differentiation in her landmark work *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*; although she focuses at length on the female figure in this work, she also offers valuable information about Native American conceptions of the sacred

as well. In her chapter titled “The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective,” she emphasizes the circular interconnectivity of all aspects of life for Native Americans. She tells us, “Stasis is not characteristic of the American Indians’ view of things. As any American Indian knows, all of life is living—that is, dynamic and aware, partaking as it does in the life of the All Spirit and contributing as it does to the continuing life of that same Great Mystery” (56). Individuals then have an obligation in this physical plane to continue the sacredness of being that originates with the Great Mystery; Native religious thought is marked by inclusiveness above all else which is completely opposed to Christianity: “The American Indian universe is based on dynamic self-esteem, while the Christian universe is based primarily on a sense of separation and loss. For the American Indian, the ability of all creatures to share in the process of ongoing creation makes all things sacred” (57). Oppose the idea of shared creation with the hierarchical, law-oriented structure of Christianity and one sees completely divergent systems. Allen explains,

The notion that nature is somewhere over there while humanity is over here or that a great hierarchical ladder of being exists on which ground and trees occupy a very low rung, animals a slightly higher one, and man (never woman)—especially “civilized” man—a very high one indeed is antithetical to tribal thought. The American Indian sees all creatures as relatives (and in tribal systems relationship is central), as offspring of the Great Mystery, as cocreators, as children of our mother, and as necessary parts of an ordered, balanced, and living whole. This concept applies to what non-Indian Americans think of as the supernatural, and it applies as well to the more tangible (phenomenal) aspects of the universe. American Indian thought makes no such dualistic division, nor does it draw a hard and fast line between what is material and what is spiritual, for it regards the two as different expressions of the same reality. (59-60)

The lack of “a hard and fast line” between the spirit world and the physical world makes this belief system ambiguous in nature; however, this ambiguity serves not to weaken but rather strengthen spiritual well-being. If “abjection is above all ambiguity,” as Kristeva points out, then Native religious thought demonstrates the abject; because Christianity is so preoccupied with separating the Law and God from the abject—from the unnamable, the undifferentiated, the taboo, and the pure corporeal—this Native perception threatens such an abject-bounded “sacred configuration” with its

own propensity to mesh borders rather than demarcate them (6, 9). Through this meshing of borders, one produces ambiguity from a Western standpoint, indeed, but from a Native standpoint this ambiguity is seen less as a threat and more as a fundamental component of life, for every being in creation depends in the most essential way upon other beings in creation; through emphasizing the need of the mundane in order to experience the sacred and vice versa, at its very core the traditional Native worldview embodies a realization of the inter-dependency of all that makes up life as we know it.

***Mino Bimaadiziwin: The Ojibwe Good Life***

Both Allen and Deloria's analysis of the differences between Western Christianity and Native religions helps us to better understand how Native religion in general incorporates the mundane into the sacred rather than separating the two. The Ojibwe religious belief system upon which Erdrich draws heavily in her writings enacts this same incorporation of the mundane and the sacred into one living composite. The Ojibwe conception of the "good life," *mino bimaadiziwin*, and the means through which this life can be achieved relies heavily upon the world of the manitous (Madsen, 11). For the traditional Ojibwe, the manitous were and are an inextricable part of everyday life, as real as the grass, the trees, rocks, and fellow human beings—indeed, the manitous themselves coexist with such physical objects. In his work, *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway*, Basil Johnston recounts the traditional stories surrounding just some of the most important manitous for the Ojibwe. In the glossary for this work, Johnston defines "manitou" as "mystery, essence, substance, matter, supernatural spirit, anima, quiddity, attribute, property, God, deity, godlike, mystical, incorporeal, transcendental, invisible reality" (242). Manitous are both supernatural beings and beings intrinsically connected to this physical world, and without which, for the Ojibwe, the physical world absolutely would not exist as it does. In his introduction to this work, Johnston lays out the fundamental realities of early Anishinauback life as well as the origin of the world according

to Anishinaubak belief. Because this traditional viewpoint is key for the following analysis, it is most efficient to reproduce the Anishinaubak creation story in Johnston's own words:

According to tradition, Kitchi-Manitou (the Great Mystery) created the world, plants, birds, animals, fish, and the other manitous in fulfillment of a vision. This world was flooded. But while the earth was under water and life was coming to an end, a new life was beginning in the skies. Geezhigo-Quae (Sky Woman) was espoused to a manitou in the skies, and she conceived.

The surviving animals and birds observed the changes taking place in Sky Woman's condition as they clung to life on the surface of the flood waters. They set aside whatever concerns they might have had about their own fates and asked one of their fellow survivors, the Giant Turtle, to offer his back as a place of rest for Sky Woman, who they then invited to come down.

Upon settling on the turtle's back, Sky Woman asked for a moiety of soil. Only the muskrat, the least of the animals, was able to retrieve the soil from beneath the flood waters, and Sky Woman took the pawful of soil and etched it around the rim of the turtle's back. She then breathed the breath of life, growth, and abundance into the soil and infused into the soil and earth the attributes of womanhood and motherhood, that of giving life, nourishment, shelter, instruction, and inspiration for the heart, mind, and spirit. Only after she had done these things did Sky Woman give birth to twins, whose descendants took the name Anishinaubak, meaning the Good Beings. In time, other nations labeled their fellow Anishinaubak with other names, such as Ojibway (Chippewa), Ottawa, Pottawatomi, Algonquin, and Mississauga.

The island where the Anishinaubak people were born continued to grow until it became a continent, the Land of the Great Turtle, as North America is commonly known to many North American Indians. By virtue of Sky Woman's creation of an island that grew into a continent and then her giving birth to her children on it, the Anishinaubak people and other North American Indians believed that the continent was given to the first-born natives of this land. Kitchi-Manitou and Sky Woman granted ownership and stewardship of the land to the natives in joint tenancy with the manitous, the birds, animals, insects, and generations still to be born. (xv-xvi)

From the beginning, then, the Anishinaubak conception of life views the physical world as intricately intertwined with the spiritual world. Out of Kitchi-Manitou—the ultimate Being of Mystery—comes the physical world; but it is only after Sky Woman “breathe[s] the breath of life, growth, and abundance into the soil and infuse[s] into the soil and earth the attributes of womanhood and motherhood, that of giving life, nourishment, shelter, instruction, and inspiration for the heart, mind, and spirit” that this reality can come to be for succeeding generations. Geezhigo-Quae may be a manitou of the skies, but it is her ability to create the world and birth her children into it that allows the Anishinaubak to come into being at all: her spiritual borders and the

physical world intertwine in such a way that the earth can thrive and grow. If the physical world originated in such a way it is, in fact, an ambiguous worldview, for we are left asking the question, “At what point does the sky manitou stop and at what point does the physical world begin?” For the Ojibwe, the lack of clearly defined borders allows the creation of a space in which separate identities may thrive and grow for all generations.

Johnston tells us that “[The Anishinaubae people’s] major purpose in life was to survive as individuals and communities. Survival was the need and first reality that governed their dreams, hopes, aspirations, and outlook and the kind of training and discipline that would best prepare their offspring to cope and be equal to the demands and challenges of primal life” (xvii). Although this people may have been attached to the physical earth to the utmost, their mode of life did not at all preclude an acute awareness of the spiritual world. Johnston tells us,

It has long been assumed that people who were preoccupied with material needs and wants would have little interest in matters of the spirit and the mind. On the contrary, it was this very mode of life, this simple way of meeting simple needs, that awakened in man and woman a consciousness that there were realities and presences in life other than the corporeal and the material. The spirit, the manitou, the mystery, were part of life and could not be separated from it. Who and what made the laws that govern the Earth? Who and what gave the birds and the animals the sense of knowing about coming changes? Who and what governed success and failure? It was the grass at one’s feet, the thunder and lightning above, the bleat of a deer as it struggled for life after it was shot, that evoked the sense that there was more to life than physical existence. (xviii)

Without the constant need to know the earth and ways in which to survive, then, the Ojibwe could not have come to such a profound understanding of the spirit realm. Thus, for the Ojibwe, the physical world and the spiritual world are inextricable, each one dependent upon the other; the sacred and the mundane coexist in such a way as to give form and shape to the world as we know it. The closer one comes to the mundane, the closer he or she comes to the sacred; the *only* way to have a sense of the sacred is through an experience of the mundane: such simple things as “the grass at one’s feet” allows one to realize the reality of the manitous and thus of the sacredness of life and

being. One cannot attain a complete awareness of the spiritual by excluding the corporeal; instead, the spiritual comes through an awareness and exploration of the corporeal.

The creation of the world by Kitchi-Manitou results from a “vision”: “According to the creation story, Kitchi-Manitou had a vision, seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, sensing, and knowing the universe, the world, the manitous, plants, animals, and human beings, and brought them into existence” (2-3). The Ojibwe conception of God thus places this Being not in some higher realm separated from this physical reality but rather within the everyday phenomena with which every human is so familiar—“seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, [and] sensing.” Kitchi-Manitou—the greatest Mystery of all responsible for existence as the Ojibwe know it—has a “vision” that quite literally takes place within a corporeal body. The ultimate deity in Ojibwe religious belief thus moves and breathes within this reality while simultaneously creating it and all the beings within it; the Ojibwe vision quest, which the people undertake as they come into maturity, follows Kitchi-Manitou’s example. After creation, “Kitchi-Manitou had done everything that needed to be done and had provided all the means for humankind’s well-being, growth, and accomplishment, so Kitchi-Manitou was finished with the world and would take no further part in humankind’s affairs” (3-4). But Kitchi-Manitou’s “abdication from the world” is not considered to be “an act of disinterest”: “creation was seen as the highest act of selflessness, of generosity, that anyone, manitou or other, can perform—the sharing of one’s gifts” (4). And Kitchi-Manitou’s vision and creation “serves as an example for men and women to emulate,” for “every person is to seek a dream or vision within the expanse of his or her soul-spirit being and, having attained it, bring it into fulfillment and reality” (3). The Ojibwe conception of Kitchi-Manitou thus ultimately precipitates an awareness of an outflowing of one’s self, an awareness of the sacred binding of one, one’s gifts, and one’s relationship to his or her community—from the clan to the cosmos; one comes to know Kitchi-Manitou through both physical phenomena as well as nonphysical manitous

(but which nonetheless depend upon this physical plane for full expression). The utmost of the sacred finds life in the natural world and in each and every human being. We do well to remember Allen's point that "[f]or the American Indian the ability of all creatures to share in the process of ongoing creation makes all things sacred" (57). To follow Kitchi-Manitou's example is to set one's foot on the path of *mino bimaadiziwin* and thus to come to a fuller understanding of being; the "good life" finds form as one connects one's self to the surrounding natural world and to other human beings and thus to the Great Mystery from which existence originated.

Such an awareness reveals the incorporation of all physical phenomena into one interconnected being within which everything not only has a place but also has that place because of everything else that exists. The "sacred configuration" of life for the Ojibwe includes all things in one harmonic body of existence; borders between the spiritual world and the physical world do not exist for the two are codependent in much the same way as humans depend upon the physical world for sustenance. Borders of being collapse in a world-conception that is not made up of strictly independent, separate identities but in identities that in the most fundamental way reflect other identities in a system of interdependent complexities. There is no such thing as strictly separated identities, only identities which become defined in relation to other identities.

A reading of Erdrich's work reveals this same awareness; although Erdrich herself is not a full-blood Chippewa, her novels and poetry reveal an inescapable connection to traditional Ojibwe beliefs. Sacred rituals and beliefs mix with the mundane physical realities that her characters encounter; this intermixing carves out a space in which realities are not only conflated but also given a fuller, more resonant expression by dint of such conflation. In her introduction to a recent collection of essays on *Tracks*, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, and *The Plague of Doves*, Debra L. Madsen uses a term coined by Gerald Vizenor in a discussion of one of the predominant themes of Erdrich's work: "survivance." She makes the apt remark that "Survivance is more than



simply physical survival and resistance; it is the continuation through time of a tribal view of the world. Survivance is a way of seeing the world and is also an understanding of what the world is and of what it is composed (Vizenor “Survivance”) (11). As Madsen observes, “Erdrich’s exploration of the possibilities for *mino bimaadiziwin*, or the living of a good life, in the contemporary United States is strongly informed by the concept of Native survivance” (11). The traditional Ojibwe viewpoint of the origins and sustenance of the world thus plays a vital role in Erdrich’s work; Madsen continues,

This survivance worldview is perhaps nowhere more evident than in her use of Ojibwe ontology: an understanding of the world in which different forms of creation are co-existent and valued equally. This can be seen, for example, in her treatment of human-animal interactions; in *The Antelope Wife* some incidents are narrated by dogs, characters have animal ancestry and Blue Prairie Woman marries a stag. Most surprisingly—and disturbingly from a Western ontological perspective—the incidents in which a soldier suckles a baby are echoed by Blue Prairie Woman suckling a puppy. In an Ojibwe ontology, there is no hierarchical separation of human and non-human creation but rather the two are continuous with one another and so are of the same ontological status. (11-12)

Just one of the ways in which Erdrich enacts this “survivance” strategy is by redefining common notions of the sacred in her novels and her poetry; for Erdrich, the sacred is not separate from the everyday happenings of life. Many critics have noticed this aspect of her work and labeled it magical realism, but to designate this intermixture as such is to appropriate it to a merely literary strategy and, I believe, to undermine the traditional Native awareness that Erdrich carefully writes into her works. The sacred *depends* upon these mundane occurrences, for it is only through realizing both their mortality and the invisible world that is simultaneously within and without the physical world that any of Erdrich’s characters come to an understanding of the sacredness of being. As mentioned earlier, three characters—Lulu Lamartine Nanapush, Fleur Pillager, and Nanapush—exemplify Kristeva’s notion of the abject not because they are so themselves but rather because their lives and actions point out the abject and redefine traditional Western conceptions of it; they each embody indigenous notions of the sacred. Instead of separation and a setting-up of independent identities, these characters fundamentally break down borders of independence and, paradoxically, establish

themselves as some of the strongest and most influential characters in Erdrich's oeuvre. Lastly, their identities point us to other identities and other aspects of the sacred, including, but not limited to, animals, plants, mythological creatures, and human relationships.

***Origins and the Want Underlying All: Lulu Lamartine Nanapush***

Kristeva tells us, "There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (5). The abject occupies a blank space of endless flux, intermixture, and ambiguity which threatens our own borders and systems of meaning; we tend to avoid the recognition of this blank space because we tend to find things that will evade this utter wanting. The word "want" is key in our analysis of Lulu: it implies an utter, absolute incompleteness, a fragment in space that impels us to complete it with our own structuration of meaning. Lulu *enacts* this sense of incompleteness; she perplexes us because she is a beautiful, powerful force on the reservation but she is also one marked by need. Her sense of incompleteness drives her longing for her mother as well as her active love life; this incompleteness, however, serves not as a negative force that she tries to cover up but rather it helps her establish her own identity: *only* by facing it so powerfully is Lulu able to come into herself. Her *want depends* upon others outside of her even as it helps her to form meaningful relationships and to influence others on the reservation. In this sense she contributes to the interdependency that Erdrich sets up among many of her other characters.

In her section titled "The Island" in (the new and revised version of) *Love Medicine*, we come to understand her profound sense of connection with her traditional heritage. She begins, "I never grew from the curve of my mother's arms. I still wanted to anchor myself against her" (68). Her first words to us reveal her profound sense of longing for connection with her mother (who, in *Tracks*, we learn is Fleur Pillager); indeed, her own identity, she claims, fits "the curve of [her] mother's arms." Although her mother "tore herself away from the run of [her] life like a riverbank,

leaving [her] to spill out alone,” Lulu claims, “Sometimes, I heard her. *N’dawnis, n’dawnis*. My daughter, she consoled me. *Güz̧hāwenimin*. Her voice came from all directions, keeping me from inner harm. Her voice was the struck match. Her voice was the steady flame” (68-69). Lulu’s intense connection to her mother—physically absent though she may be—reveals, above all, a lack of separation from the maternal figure.

Kristeva discusses the need for separation from the mother in order to cast off the abject—the blending of selves that occurs within the maternal body—and to subsequently develop one’s self as an independent subject. The maternal figure also plays a role in the development of the sacred; because the sacred depends upon casting off the abject—that which produces a blurring of identity and exists outside our own structures of meaning—it must necessarily depend upon separation from the mother. In Judaic Christianity, for example,

The body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic. In order to confirm that, it should endure no gash other than that of circumcision, equivalent to sexual separation and/or separation from the mother. Any other mark would be the sign of belonging to the impure, the non-separate, the non-symbolic, the non-holy. (102)

Kristeva makes the point that the mother figure potentially incites horror for one hates to think of the ambiguity that arises at the moment of birth; one knows not where he or she begins and where his or her mother ends. One prefers to enter into an independent being that is fully separated from the “violent, clumsy breaking away” that every human being must experience (13). The recognition of this breakage implies a recognition of the power of the abject and the desire for more separation, more breakage.

But for Lulu to reject her mother is to reject an intrinsic portion of her individual identity; even as she grows up she does not close herself off to her mother. She tells us, “I needed my mother the more I became like her—a Pillager kind of woman with a sudden body, fierce outright wishes, a surprising heart” (71). The more she grows up—and thus the more she comes into her

own personality—the more she needs the mother figure from which she originally came; Lulu’s sense of self is hardly cordoned off from her mother and thus from the sacred sense of life and nourishment that is motherhood. We do well to remember Johnston’s recounting of the first mother—Sky Woman—and her actions that laid the foundations for this living planet: “[Sky Woman] breathed the breath of life, growth, and abundance into the soil and infused into the soil and earth the attributes of womanhood and motherhood, that of giving life, nourishment, shelter, instruction, and inspiration for the heart, mind, and spirit” (xv). For Lulu, her mother is the positive contrary of the abject: a necessity to whose form—though absent—she clings and for whose ability to give nourishment and instruction she longs incessantly.

Although Lulu bears a grudge against her mother for sending her to the government school—a decision which, Nanapush tells her, Fleur was forced to make—she comes to take on many of the attributes of Fleur Pillager nonetheless; this growing into a woman who is many ways remarkably similar to Fleur occurs as Lulu lives on Moses Pillager’s island. Although Moses is mysterious, untouchable, and an outcast, Lulu both seduces and heals him with her burgeoning power. She tells us that she “caught” him with her alluring capabilities (79). He becomes paralyzed by his fascination and longing for her: “My black eyes opened wide, my *wiindigoo* stare caught him, and I let him see the sharp flash of my teeth. He followed both of his hands as they flew forward and stroked me. I didn’t know whether I was acting from my own intentions now. I did what came into my mind” (80). This moment in particular depicts her in striking resemblance to her mother; in the second chapter of *Tracks* we become acquainted with several of Fleur’s defining features, including her “clear black agate” eyes and her “strong and sharp and very white” teeth with which she frequently flashes “the white wolf grin a Pillager turns on its victims” (11, 18-19). In thinking about Lulu’s resemblance to Fleur we do well to remember that “[p]ower travels in the bloodlines,

handed out before birth,” for Lulu’s identity takes on a sense of the same sacredness that pervades the entire Pillager line, one of simultaneous ambiguity and connection to the earth (31).

Lulu becomes a woman as she “[takes] down his [Moses Pillager’s] gravehouse,” the one which his mother, Different Thumbs, created in order to “fool the spirits” that came with a bout of terrible disease: “[Different Thumbs] didn’t want to lose her son, so she decided to fool the spirits by pretending that Moses was already dead, a ghost. She sang his death song, made his gravehouse, laid spirit food upon the ground, put his clothes upon him backwards. His people spoke past him. Nobody ever let out his real name. Nobody saw him. He lived invisible, and he survived” (74, 81). Lulu’s burgeoning sacred power lives through her touch, for she tells us, “I pulled him into the circle of my arms the way a mother encourages her child to walk. Touch by touch, I took down his gravehouse. With my kisses, I placed food for living people between his lips. He told me his real name. I whispered it, once. Not that name that fooled the dead, but the word that harbored his life” (81). It is only after she taps into the spiritual connection which she shares with her mother that her touch is able to heal Moses; she comes most fully into herself, it seems, the more she becomes like her mother. And as her mother gives her life, Lulu gives Moses life.

But this coming into her own identity cannot escape some sense of hurt and need which will bear an indelible mark on her character; her experience with Moses Pillager forms her so deeply precisely because it does mark her out as a woman not only living in connection to her mysterious past but also as a woman scarred by a sense of profound need:

I was not immune, and I would not leave undamaged. I must have rolled in the beds of wild rose, for the tiny thorns—small, yellow—pierced my skin. Their poison is desire and it dissolved in my blood. And, too, the cats made me one of them—sleek and without mercy. Avid, falling hungry upon the defenseless body. I want to grind men’s bones to drink in my night tea. I want to enter them the way their hot shadows fold into their bodies in full sunlight. I want to be their food, their harmful drinks.

To this day, I still hurt. (82)

She thus becomes most fully herself once she incorporates both her past and a need to in fact incorporate; in other words, she incorporates need to the utmost sense. She is marked by “desire,” by a need to swallow up others, by a need to in fact be *unseparated* from this desire. She embodies a woman who feels too much and who thus opens herself up to the world. Her sense of incompleteness that arises when alone ultimately leads her to desire others; but more powerful than this desire is her “hurt”: she thus makes clear to us her incompleteness, her want that underlies her own self. As Kristeva points out, the normal reaction is to transfer the threat of abjection onto other objects outside of one’s self that threatens one’s own “clean and proper” being, that threatens crossing the border of separation from this abjection; instead of being the active agent of the abject, one becomes the passive victim. Lulu’s behavior puzzles us so much precisely because she does not cordon herself off to the outside world but in fact remains a character whose borders, though constituted through her connection to her heritage and the earth, are nonetheless open and permeable. This fundamental aspect itself draws its life from her time spent with Moses Pillager, as she gives her touch to Moses, giving him a sense of new life, and as she bears his child (to be named Gerry Nanapush). She becomes restless, desirous to leave the island, although Moses himself cannot leave, for “[h]e was his island, he was me, he was his cats”; Lulu’s need to leave the island does not, however, preclude her need to “not exist from the inside out but from the outside in”—she does indeed carry this Pillager attribute as she later tells us in “The Good Tears”: “I was in love with the whole world and all that lived in its rainy arms. . . . I’d open my mouth wide, my ears wide, my heart, and I’d let everything inside” (83, 272).

Lulu’s sacred connection to the world which surrounds her also becomes evident in her many love affairs with men; she declares of all these men, “There were times I let them in just for being part of the world. I believe that angels in the body make us foreign to ourselves when touching. In this way I’d slip my body to earth, like a heavy sack, and for a few moments I would

blend in with all that forced my heart” (273). Just as Lulu longs for physical connection, so does she long to be rid of the body that creates her own border of being:

How come we’ve got these bodies? They are frail supports for what we feel. There are times I get so hemmed in by my arms and legs that I look forward to getting past them. As though death will set me free like a traveling cloud. . . . I’ll be out there as a piece of the endless body of the world feeling pleasures so much larger than skin and bones and blood. (283)

Thus instead of borders Lulu would have a body beyond the flesh, a body that meshes into “the endless body of the world” and that gains a fuller identity precisely by being swallowed up into a larger whole and thus that would be completed by this act. Her body precludes her from this ideal vision, thus this longing finds earthly fulfillment not only through her seemingly countless liaisons with men but also through her commitment to remaining a true-time Pillager, one immersed in her past and the world around her. Her life manifests the original sacred vision of the interconnectivity of all life.

In *The Bingo Palace*, when Lulu gets mixed-up with hiding and helping her fugitive son, Gerry, the federal marshals come to get her; but she is ready. We are told, “All was in perfect order for their arrival. No possible doubt about it, none at all. For who else was attired in her full regalia at that hour, dressed traditional, decked out in black velvet with flowers from the woodlands beaded into the shining nap—red rose, yellow heart, white leaves, and winking petals—who else was dressed like Lulu?” (261-262) She’s an “old-time Pillager” who watches out for her convict son and realizes the federal government’s complete inability to capture a Nanapush (265). As the federal marshals handcuff her and take her away, she taps into her traditional heritage to make a statement to those around her; no government official can possibly extinguish one’s connection to his or her Native roots. We are told that, “Down the frosted squares of the sidewalk, Lulu Lamartine dances the old-lady traditional, a simple step, but complex in its quiet balance, striking. . . just before they whisk her inside, she raises her fan. . . . Out of her mouth comes the old-lady trill, the victory yell

that runs up our necks. . . . we can't help but join her" (265). A mundane scene—filled with government officials, cameras, and microphones—bears witness to a moment in which Lulu displays not only traditional regalia but also a spiritual awareness of her heritage.

### ***Ties to the Land: Fleur Pillager***

Fleur Pillager is arguably one of Erdrich's most memorable and crucial characters. Barely mentioned in *Love Medicine*, we come to know her well in *Tracks*, *The Bingo Palace*, and *Four Souls*. Out of all Erdrich's characters it is Fleur whose life most represents the intertwining of the sacred and the mundane and the ambiguity of being that is such an intrinsic part of the abject. Indeed, Fleur's own identity is inextricably bound not only to the land but also to animals and Ojibwe mythological creatures; this concatenation in turn creates the sense of the sacred which so informs her life as a whole.

We read about Fleur's first known beginnings in the first section of *Tracks*, narrated by the elder Nanapush. During the winter of 1912, consumption ravaged the Ojibwe; Nanapush tells Lulu (his unseen auditor), "My own family was wiped out one by one, leaving only Nanapush" (2). His discovery of Fleur—the only one to survive the consumption that wiped out her family—becomes lumped with his recounting the "last" of many Ojibwe events:

My girl, I saw the passing of times you will never know.  
I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with  
a pelt of more than two years' growth. I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty,  
and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake. I axed  
the last birch that was older than I, and I saved the last Pillager. (2)

Fleur's status as "the last Pillager" signifies many things: she is the last of a group of full-blood, traditional Ojibwe, left without immediate ties of blood-kin in a rapidly changing world; she has an intrinsic connection to the Pillager land surrounding Lake Matchimanito. Like the Pillagers before her she can tap into secret medicine ways. Out of all the family names in Erdrich's oeuvre the Pillagers most represent a fundamental tie to the land and the manitous; additionally, they are known



as the bear clan. Nanapush finds Fleur and her dead family members in her family's cabin near Lake Matchimanito; from the first moment he meets her, she is described in terms of a wolf—this is merely the first of many times in which she embodies traits of specific animals, from a wolf to a bear even to the mythical creature of Misshepesu. Nanapush tells us, “She was wild as a filthy wolf, a big bony girl whose sudden bursts of strength and snarling cries terrified the listening Pukwan” (3).

In the following section of *Tracks* (previously published separately as the short story “Fleur”), Pauline Puyat tells of Fleur's disruptive stay in the (fictional) town of Argus, North Dakota, south of her reservation land. Pauline tells us how Fleur supposedly drowned twice, each time seemingly cursing to death the men who pull her from the “cold and glassy waters” of Matchimanito; after the second time she drowned, “nobody dared to court her because it was clear that Misshepesu, the water man, the monster, wanted her for himself” (10-11). To Pauline, who ultimately abandons her Native American heritage, Fleur's identity is at best marginally human and at worst outright dangerous; her portrayal of Fleur reveals her own fear of her even as it reveals Fleur's power through her connection with the sacred elements of her heritage. Fleur serves as a frightening threat to Pauline, a being who embodies danger and evil; Pauline fears her because she is so connected to the land and her Pillager ways. She tells us,

After the first [drowning], we thought she'd keep to herself, live quiet, stop killing men off by drowning in the lake. We thought she would keep the good ways. But then, after the second return, and after old Nanapush nursed her through the sickness, we knew that we were dealing with something much more serious. Alone out there [on Lake Matchimanito], she went haywire, out of control. She messed with evil, laughed at the old women's advice, and dressed like a man. She got herself into some half-forgotten medicine, studied ways we shouldn't talk about. . . . She laid the heart of an owl on her tongue so she could see at night, and went out, hunting, not even in her own body. We know for sure because the next morning, in the snow or dust, we followed the tracks of her bare feet and saw where they changed, where the claws sprang out, the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt. By night we heard her chuffing cough, the bear cough. By day her silence and the wide grin she threw to bring down our guard made us frightened. (12)

Fleur incites fear and confusion in Pauline, who embraces white Catholic views of the world in favor of indigenous views; for Pauline, Fleur embodies everything but stability and a clear sense of one

bordered being. She goes out “seeking whom she may devour,” if you will, “not even in her own body,” a hunting, ambiguous being who threatens Pauline’s own (Western) sense of the world. Fleur also threatens the typical Western reader’s sense of the world even as she appears powerful and mysterious beyond belief. Fleur’s “own body” cannot be contained by her human skin; she does not move beyond this body through a soul but rather through other animal forms. Because this does not fit into Catholic beliefs about the self, Pauline necessarily believes Fleur works through powers of darkness and evil.

Fleur’s stay in Argus incites the same sense of fear as she quite literally turns the town upside-down. She ends up working at Kozka’s Meats, owned by Pete and Fritzie Kozka, who have also taken in the young Pauline. Although Fleur incites fear in Pauline she also fascinates her; Pauline’s curiosity about Fleur leads her to constantly watch her, observing her every movement. She recalls how Fleur’s ability to play cards leads three men—Lily Veddar, Tor Grunewald, and Dutch James—to react to their fear of her seeming ability to control chance by physically harming her. Fleur and the men “stuck with poker, or variations, for one solid week and each time Fleur won exactly one dollar, no more and no less, too consistent for luck” (21). One night she wins all the money on the table, “grinning that same wolf grin she’d used on me,” Pauline tells us; the men subsequently brutalize her and rape her (23). The next day a tornado sweeps through the town, leaving mostly everything untouched except for the meat cellar of Kozka’s Meats, where the three men took refuge. The tornado itself becomes personified, as Pauline tells us, “Clouds hung down, witch teats, a tornado’s green-brown cones, and as I watched, one flicked out and became a delicate probing thumb”; then “[t]he odd cloud became a fat snout that nosed along the earth and sniffed, jabbed, picked at things, sucked them up, blew them apart, rooted around as if it was following a certain scent, then stopped behind us at the butcher shop and bored down like a drill” (27-28). Fleur—whom no one in the town can seem to find during the storm—becomes a storm of divine

wrath on the men who wronged her; her connection to old medicine ways—her connection to her family land—gives her the capacity to control some portion of the natural world and to wreak revenge on those who have wronged her. As Deloria says, “Most mysterious was the Indian reverence for land”: Fleur Pillager’s ancestral ties to a reverence for their traditional family land gives her power as she moves and breathes in the mundane world (103).

Pauline is indeed right when, later in *Tracks*, she declares of Fleur, “She was the one who closed the door or swung it open. Between the people and the gold-eyed creature in the lake, the spirit which they said was neither good nor bad but simply had an appetite, Fleur was the hinge”; Fleur is the medium through which the power of the spirit-world comes into being (139). When the Indian agent confiscates her land and the lumberjacks descend upon the woods surrounding her cabin on Matchimanito she yet again exerts a supernatural revenge. After Eli leaves her to work for the lumberjacks, she manages on her own even as the sound of falling trees and axes slowly encroaches upon her house. Nanapush goes to visit her and becomes aware of the “conversations” that surround her cabin:

The moment I entered [the clearing], I heard the hum of a thousand conversations. Not only the birds and small animals, but the spirits in the western stands had been forced together. The shadows of the trees were crowded with their forms. The twigs spun independently of wind, vibrating like small voices. I stopped, stood among these trees whose flesh was so much older than ours, and it was then that my relatives and friends took final leave, abandoned me to the living. (220)

Nanapush sees his wives and his children who have passed on and takes “final leave” of them; later, in a moment of clarity, he tells us, “Fleur had resisted these ghosts, at least she was not among them. So I would remain with the living too” (221). Even though her ancestral land must undergo complete and utter decimation, Fleur still remains with the living; her sacred tie to the land seemingly gives her the power to blow her trees over onto the lumberjacks. Nanapush remarks that “[h]er face was warm with excitement and her look was chilling in its clear amusement” as he feels the wind gathering, preparing to wreak revenge on those who have wronged Fleur Pillager (222).

She must eventually leave her land due to the encroaching white man, but not without claiming the lives of those who have trespassed on sacred ground.

Fleur's tie to the sacred land permeates sections of *The Bingo Palace* as well. Lyman Lamartine—illegitimate son of Lulu Lamartine and Nector Kashpaw—hardly holds Fleur's same respect for the land in his hunger for the proceeds that will come from a bingo resort built on the land by Lake Matchimanito; Fleur comes to him in a dream, declaring, "*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*" (148). Just as we learn in *Tracks*, Fleur has the capacity to speak loudly and clearly—whether through actions or words—to those who lack a sense of the sacredness of land. Her other grandson, Lipsha, acknowledges that Fleur's place "is a spirit place, good if you are good and bad if you have done bad things, like me" (133). Lipsha, though a likable character, has diverged from his traditional background; Fleur seeks to get his attention by quite literally capturing him, for as he follows her into the brush near her cabin, he realizes, "[t]his is a one-way woods. She has me. She is drawing me forward on a magic string coughed up from her insides" (134). After Lipsha—centered on his own obsession with the beautiful Shawnee Ray Toose—tells her that he needs a love medicine, he realizes his grandmother's power: "Her face spreads out on the bones and goes on darkening and darkening. Her nose tilts up into a black snout and her eyes sink. I struggle to move from my place, but my legs are numb, my arms, my face, and then the lamp goes out. Blackness. I sit there motionless and my head fills with the hot rasp of her voice" (137). Fleur's interconnection with the natural world and therefore her powerful sense of sacredness comes through as she tries to speak to her grandson about love medicines; she literally becomes a bear in form, but on a deeper level she becomes a source of wisdom for Lipsha. She overwhelms him with her ambiguous nature, so much so that he cannot move; this power that she exhibits is the most authoritative way for her to answer his demand for a love medicine.

In the last section of the book, Fleur seems to take a final leave; but her influence does not entirely leave with her physical body. As she walks along the frozen waters of Matchimanito, towards what appears to be her death, “the old strength that had served her in her hardest times seized her, lifted and set her again on the unmarked path” (273). Fleur’s “tracks”—literally and spiritually (they are both the same)—“should have filled with snow,” but instead one is able to see “where [her tracks] changed, the pad broadened, the claw pressed into the snow” (273). She should have been forgotten, her tracks “should have blown away with those rough songs from the wild dead we cannot hush”; instead Fleur remains in a liminal state, here but not-here, for sometimes, the narrator declares, “she covers ground easily, skims back to watch us in our brilliant houses. We believe she follows our hands with her underwater eyes as we deal the cards on green baize, as we drown our past in love of chance, as our money collects, as we set fires and make personal wars over what to do with its weight, as we go forward into our own unsteady hopes” (273-274). Fleur thus becomes a sacred force for the Ojibwe through her connection to the land, liminal and ambiguous and utterly solidified in her identity. She serves as a reminder that “there is more to be told, more than we know, more than can be caught in the sieve of our thinking”; she serves as a reminder of how “a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct,” as Kristeva would put it, “amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn” where there is no subject nor object but rather “indifferentiation” and thus something which cannot be fully grasped by mere cogitation (274; 18, 58).

***Words and the Inter-connectivity of Lives: Nanapush***

Another character who exemplifies an awareness of the sacred and the mundane is the traditional elder Nanapush. Out of all of Erdrich’s characters, he is the most humorous, realistic, and often bawdy, but he nonetheless reveals an acute awareness of the spiritual world; he makes this awareness clear to us and other characters through his speech, as he is seemingly incapable of

remaining quiet for long. Kristeva would say such a character is phobic, and must needs structure the world around himself in order to hide the abject, but Nanapush embodies a unique case in point: he talks in order to purport his traditional native ways, outcast and abject as he is in the opinion of white society; he takes his culture and gives it words to spread it to others. He himself says in *Tracks*, “I know what’s fact, and have never been afraid of talking” (4). Nanapush’s straightforward manner of language serves to reinforce the practical problems facing the Ojibwe tribe; though he sometimes lacks the poetic beauty so prevalent in other characters’ speech, he nonetheless forwards Erdrich’s purpose in illuminating the problems facing contemporary Native Americans. This straightforward language does not degrade the sacred/mundane element nor does it favor the mundane over the sacred; rather it serves to reinforce traditional tribal notions of the spiritual world as existing within and inextricably linked to the sacred.

Nanapush eludes the grasp of the white religion precisely by means of embracing his traditional culture. In *Tracks* he tells us, “I know this. 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” (33). Like Fleur, he has a respect for the land, though he lacks the extreme power which she garners from her personal connection with it; unlike Fleur, he has the ready chance to convert to white ways, only to deny them outright: “I had a Jesuit education in the halls of Saint John before I ran back to the woods and forgot all my prayers,” he tells us (33). It is through storytelling that Nanapush becomes a vital elder for passing on the knowledge of traditional viewpoints, including an awareness of the spiritual elements that permeate everyday life. The sacred design of human interconnectivity and consequences of actions becomes clear via the passing on of wisdom through stories; even names—yet more words—are vitally important for Nanapush, for they point to identities not existing independently but existing through a sharing of some species of spiritual bonding. Nanapush tells Lulu,

Since I saved [Fleur] from the sickness, I was entangled with her. Not that I knew it at first. Only looking back is there a pattern. I was a vine of a wild grape that twined the timbers and drew them close. Or maybe I was a branch, coming from the Kashpaws, that lived long enough to touch the next tree over, which was Pillagers, of whom there were only two—Moses and Fleur—far cousins, related not so much by blood as by name and chance survival. Or maybe there was just me, Nanapush, in the thick as ever. The name had a bearing on what happened later, as well, for it was through Fleur Pillager that the name Nanapush was carried on and won't die with me, won't rot in a case of bones and leather. There is a story to it the way there is a story to all, never visible while it is happening. Only after, when an old man sits dreaming and talking in his chair, the design springs clear.

There was so much we saw and never knew. (33-34)

In the word is handed down an awareness of the sacred interconnectivity of lives as well as a way in which to understand this complex truth; through it one comes to an understanding of the need for realizing “the design [that] springs clear” through telling stories to others. Deloria observes, “The largest difference I can see between Indian religion and Christian religions is in inter-personal relationships” (121). Nanapush recounts stories to Lulu in *Tracks* precisely in order to reveal “the [sacred] design” of human interconnectivity. Because “[r]eligion is not synonymous with a large organizational structure in Indian eyes” it finds existence in “[s]pontaneous communal activity” (122). What happens in *Tracks* may be traced back to chance happenings but Nanapush gives these occurrences a form via words and thus enacts an awareness of the importance of inter-connectivity among individuals; for Nanapush, stories serve to show how things are related to one another.

Allen's discussion of the sacred does not leave out the connection between language and spiritual awareness for Native culture; she writes that “[t]he artistry of the tribes is married to the essence of language itself, for through language one can share one's singular being with that of the community and know within oneself the communal knowledge of the tribe” (55). For Native people the emphasis on the oral tradition points not to individual self-expression, but rather to communal bonding: “In this art [of language], the greater self and all-that-is are blended into a balanced whole, and in this way the concept of being that is the fundamental and sacred spring of life is given voice and being for all” (55). Nanapush's storytelling propensities serve to integrate

individual, separate lives into one coherent, communal whole in which each individual connects to other individuals; he uses words not to make sense of things by separation but rather by integration of personal relationships and happenings.

Even as he counsels the love-struck Eli Kashpaw in how to successfully win Fleur, he explicitly reveals how, for him, talking—telling stories—wards off death; he tells us, “During the sickness, when I was the last one left, I saved myself by starting a story. . . . I got well by talking. Death could not get a word in edgewise, grew discouraged, and traveled on” (46). The stories he has had handed down to him are seemingly endless, for “[t]hey’re all attached, and once I start there is no end to telling because they’re hooked from one side to the other, mouth to tail” (46). But Nanapush not only *tells* stories for he also *participates* in the complexities of stories. When Father Damien comes to the reservation to baptize Lulu, he asks Nanapush for the father’s name; Eli supposedly fathered Lulu but there are rumors that the girl is not his child but Misshepesu’s. Nanapush tells us, “There were so many tales, so many possibilities, so many lies. The waters were so muddy I thought I’d give them another stir” (61). He then tells Father Damien that the father’s name is Nanapush and that her name is Lulu; Nanapush and Lulu’s lives are inextricably linked, and he leans in favor of perhaps objectively false but nonetheless meaningful stories.

Without Nanapush’s keen ability to recount stories—whether or not they are objectively true—we as readers would be bereft of much key information about the world in which Erdrich’s characters live. But not only does he reveal incidents and relationships—he also provides us as readers with a learning experience in how to better understand the Ojibwe sense of being. In *Tracks* he tells Lulu about her ancestors, including her mother, and reinforces indigenous notions about relationships, meaning, and sacred power; for instance, his account of Fleur’s revenge on the lumberjacks makes clear to the listener that the trees falling was no ordinary event but one caused by her sacred connection to the land. In *Four Souls* Nanapush tells us more about Fleur’s time in



Minneapolis and her attempt to wreak revenge on John James Mauser, the lumber baron responsible for the destruction of so many trees on her land; without Nanapush, we would have neither this story nor the broader meaning and whole of which it forms a part.

Nanapush's traditional understanding of time and the nature of being do marginalize us as readers by dint of perplexing us, but this marginalization ultimately helps us to better understand Native notions of life; one such moment of perplexity occurs when he gives his name instead of Eli's as Lulu's father's name. Another such moment occurs in *Four Souls* as he uses the example of an owl coughball—of all things—to explain the nature of the story:

The coughball of an owl is a packed lump of everything the bird can't digest—bones, fur, teeth, claws, and nails. An owl tears apart its catch, gulps it down whole, and nourishes itself on blood and flesh. The residue, the undissolvable, fuses. In the small, light, solid pellet, the frail skull of a finch, femur of a mouse, cleft necklace of vertebrae, seed-fine teeth, gray gopher and rabbit fur. A perfect compression of being. What is the essence, the soul? my Jesuit teachers used to ask of their students. What is the irreducible? I answer, what the owl pukes. (71)

In a typical move, Nanapush conflates the high and the low—literally the spirit-world and, well, something quite “down-to-earth” and not too appealing to think about. But he makes his point beautifully nonetheless: “what the owl pukes . . . is also the story—what is left after the events in all their juices and chaos are reduced to the essence. The story—all that time does not digest” (71).

The stories that Nanapush recounts to us (and to Lulu, his namesake) thus serve to further memories and meaning. We read his stories and we ultimately become fully aware of the conflation of the highs and the lows which we can reach as human beings and which all function to represent life to the fullest, or the good life, *mino bimaadiziwin*, in traditional Ojibwe thought.

## *Chapter Two*

### *The Feminine Facet of Erdrich: An Originating Space for All*

“I want to grind men’s bones to drink in my night tea. I want to enter them the way their hot shadows fold into their bodies in full sunlight. I want to be their food, their harmful drinks.” –Lulu Nanapush Lamartine, *Love Medicine*

#### ***(Re)visions of the Feminine***

One of the most striking and obvious features of Erdrich’s work takes the form of her powerful and unforgettable female characters. Through these women, Erdrich revises our notions of the feminine by revealing these characters to be positively essential to the life of those around them and to any deep understanding of her work; she underlines the centrality of woman in not only her works but also in traditional Native thought. In the first section of her book *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, “The Ways of our Grandmothers,” Paula Gunn Allen tells us,

In the beginning was thought, and her name was Woman. The Mother, the Grandmother, recognized from earliest times into the present among those peoples of the Americas who kept to the eldest traditions, is celebrated in social structures, architecture, law, custom, and the oral tradition. To her we owe our lives, and from her comes our ability to endure, regardless of the concerted assaults on our, on Her, being, for the past five hundred years of colonization. She is the Old Woman who tends the fires of life. She is Old Woman Spider who weaves us together in a fabric of interconnection. She is the Eldest God, the one who Remembers and Re-members; and though the history of the past five hundred years has taught us bitterness and helpless rage, we endure into the present, alive, certain of our significance, certain of her centrality, her identity as the Sacred Hoop of Being. (11)

While Allen draws most specifically from her own Laguna Pueblo tradition (in which Thought Woman—also called Spider Woman—exists before all else), her point about the primary role the woman plays in life resonates with other Native cultures as well. The Woman figure of Native thought ties herself inextricably to the sacredness of life; she gave life in the beginning and continues to give life for those who tap into their Native traditions. Her generative and nourishing being

connects different aspects of life together in one unitary, working whole. Woman embodies both a productive, healing force as well as a force of destruction, for “Woman bears, that is true. [But] [s]he also destroys. That is true” (14). Allen thus begins her landmark book by solidifying the utter potentiality of Woman as she is known in Native thought, the potential she carries for both life and death.

By emphasizing this potential which only Woman—and women—house within, Allen thus redirects a Western patriarchally-based perception towards one in which gynocracy reigns above all else. Without Woman and her generative powers, existence as we know it could not exist. Allen’s work may not be entirely exhaustive in scope—although she does bring up quite a number of different tribes from different parts of the continent as evidence—but she nonetheless effects her purpose of helping her readers to understand what a gynocratic culture entails. Johnston’s account of the beginning of the world from the Ojibwe perspective could be yet more evidence to prove Allen’s point. Johnston tells us that after Kitchi-Manitou created the world, it was flooded; due to Sky Woman, however, life on earth was able to survive and regenerate. She became married to a manitou who also dwelt in the skies and became pregnant. What happens next reveals the initial reverence for Sky Woman’s condition—literally her life-giving potential—that results in the present state of the planet: “The surviving animals and birds observed the changes taking place in Sky Woman’s condition as they clung to life on the surface of the flood waters. They set aside whatever concerns they might have had about their own fates and asked one of their fellow survivors, the Giant Turtle, to offer his back as a place of rest for Sky Woman, who they then invited to come down” (xv). As she takes her place upon the turtle’s back, she asks for a handful of soil, which the seemingly insignificant muskrat fetches for her deep beneath the waters; she “etch[es] it around the rim of the turtles back” and “breath[es] the breath of life, growth, and abundance in the soil and infuse[s] into the soil and earth the attributes of womanhood and motherhood, that of giving life,

nourishment, shelter, instruction, and inspiration for the heart, mind, and spirit” (xv). Once the ground is established, she then gives birth to twins, from whom the Anishinauback people descend.

Were Allen to include this one Native creation story into her work, it would further highlight not only the life-giving powers of Woman but also the respect and reverence for her that allows these powers to come into full fruition; she indeed had a choice—she could have refused to come down and save the few remaining creatures and thus have effected death—but the respect shown to her ultimately results in life rather than death. Her ability to create also further highlights her power: Kitchi-Manitou, the ultimate originating Mystery, does not create the land wherein the Anishinauback people will come to thrive—instead, this task is left to a female figure. Finally, this act of creation and life-giving reveals Kitchi-Manitou’s dependency upon her act, something which only a Woman can fully enact.

Erdrich herself draws on this idea of the female figure as the central giver of both life and death; indeed, one can easily make the claim that her most powerful and unforgettable characters are women. These female figures each exert a powerful influence over those who surround them, and in fact, they need not necessarily be physically present in order to exert power. In her essay titled “Of Vision Quests and Spirit Guardians: Female Power in the Novels of Louise Erdrich,” Annette Van Dyke makes the argument that Fleur, Lulu, Marie, and Zelda exert a powerful force on the reservation “[b]y virtue of being female” and as a result of “the Chippewa vision quest and spirit guardian . . . which often takes on a peculiarly sexual form for Chippewa women” (130-131). These four female characters in particular, Van Dyke argues, come into their own power once they tap into their traditional background by means of the vision quest and taking on a spirit guardian; thus Van Dyke implicitly takes note of the profound spiritual energy which, when women tap into it, allows them to become powerful. Powerful women in Erdrich’s novels, it must be observed, do in fact participate in the sacred; indeed their power hinges upon their individual ability to delve into it.

Thus, Fleur and Lulu become powerful female forces because they embrace traditional worldviews of themselves and the world surrounding them; Pauline Puyat, on the other hand, embodies a much weaker version of the feminine due to her repudiation of her traditional Ojibwe heritage.

If the Ojibwe conception of *mino bimaadiziwin* reconfigures Western notions of the relationship between the sacred and the mundane, and if in Ojibwe thought powerful females are connected to the sacred, then it follows that Erdrich's writing in this tradition also reconfigures the feminine. Kristeva turns upside-down and inside-out our perception of the intrinsic nature of the abject and its placement in our social constructions, and Erdrich redefines the placement of the abject as it is commonly enunciated through the female figure.

Just as the Western conception of the world separates the mundane and the sacred—creates a “sacred configuration” that is “edged by the abject”—so too has it had the tendency of socially separating the male and the female and initiating a hierarchical order wherein the male always overrides the female (6). Kristeva's essay returns at several points to the feminine and the threat that it represents for separating order; above all, the feminine—from whom we *all* come—threatens us (with abjection) precisely because to go back into her is to threaten one's individual identity, one's own borders. She defines this moment of our “personal archaeology”: “Giving birth: the height of bloodshed and life, scorching moment of hesitation (between inside and outside, ego and other, life and death), horror and beauty, sexuality and the blunt negation of the sexual” (13, 155). The birth scene thus leads us to the question, “Where do I end and where does my mother begin?”; always, we need borders, separation. The child separates from the mother, indeed, but the open womb threatens to swallow us back up again and horrifies us because we realize the malleability of borders that occurred in the making of our own “independent” identities—to paraphrase Kristeva.

Kristeva's chapter titled “Those Females Who Can Wreck the Infinite” draws our attention to the utter power of the maternal to “wreck” the infinitude of identity-less existence, to quite

literally give us life and, therefore, death; in some sense, then, the maternal has the power to dispense both life and death, just as Allen claims—we are dependent upon the maternal above all else. Kristeva utilizes the words of Louis-Ferdinand Céline—one of the best-known and most perplexing French writers of the twentieth century—found in one of his letters, and they are perfectly apt here, for they point out what may be the most important component of understanding just exactly *why* the feminine and the abject are so closely bound up together. Just as the abject fundamentally controls life—for we constantly set up our own systems against its threatening aspect—so too does the feminine function as a primary force that must be constantly reckoned with.

Kristeva tells us that “before the beginning” of our lives as we know them, there was “separation”; we first separate ourselves from the animal, and then the maternal (12). This separation necessitates the construction of separated selves and the entrance into the symbolic universe. She tells us, “The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*” (12). The first tendency of society, then, involves removing any ambiguity between human and animal (this is most definitively the case of Western society, but not, as has already been implied, the case for Native American culture). Within our own history, or “personal archaeology,” however, there looms an even greater threat than one’s separated identity: the mother, the feminine entity whose being nourished our own from the very beginning:

The abject confronts us . . . within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling. The difficulty the mother has in acknowledging (or being acknowledged by) the symbolic realm—in other words, the problem she has with the phallus that her father or her husband stands for—is not such as to help the future subject leave the natural mansion. The child can serve its mother as token of her own authentication; there is, however, hardly any reason for her to serve as go-between for it to become autonomous and authentic in its turn. In such close combat, the symbolic light that a third party, eventually the father, can contribute helps the future subject, the more so if it happens to be endowed with a robust supply of drive energy, in pursuing a reluctant struggle against what, having been the mother, will turn into an abject. Repelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself. Ab-jecting. (13)

Facing the maternal therefore means facing one's own origins, one's own originating source wherein boundaries of the self move and shift within an ambiguous space; without "the symbolic light" that the father embodies, the child's own identity seems inextricably linked to that of the mother. In order to completely separate and thus in order to fully enter the symbolic realm of structuration one comes to view the maternal more as "stifling" than as "securing": the security of our own clean and proper selves (paradoxically) requires leaving the security—the utter timeless power—of the mother. We substitute one form of security for another, our own in defiance of the timeless security of the mother.

Because Erdrich's powerful female characters are both Native Americans and female, they are essentially doubly abject: cast-offs by virtue of their marginalized culture and by virtue of their physical sexuality. They nonetheless embody a force that centrally impacts Erdrich's oeuvre; one has a hard time imagining how fundamentally different Erdrich's writings would be were several or all of her female characters to be eliminated. They thus contribute to her larger vision of interconnectivity to others in the community and to traditional beliefs; without these important female figures her fiction, indeed, would hardly have gained the status in American literature that it has. By producing an oeuvre in which Native American females figure prominently, she emphasizes not only the centrality of the feminine in Native American culture but also redefines the power of the feminine.

***June Morrissey: An Absent Mother, a Hurt Woman—a Powerful Figure Nonetheless***

In his essay titled "Opening the Text: *Love Medicine* and the Return of the Native American Woman," Robert Silberman points out that, in *Love Medicine*, the narrative style embodies "a collection of interlocking narratives each focusing on a different narrator or major character, yet all ultimately related to [an] original event—the death of June Kashpaw" (105). As he also points out, June's death does indeed mark the very beginning of the novel; each of the succeeding characters are

in some way tied to that tragic event. June becomes an integrating force for the novel; indeed, he observes, “The characters often tell their own stories, not only explaining their relationship to the dead woman but also spinning out a larger web of relationships that appear as a comment on her death, thereby providing the context in which it can be understood” (105). June’s death apart from the community which surrounds her thus cannot be said to be fully understood or grasped; *Love Medicine* may be composed of different narrators, but each of their stories in some way connects to the larger whole, which, as Silberman rightly suggests, “appear as a [collective] comment on her death” (105). She may be a physically absent character, but she plays a large role in many of the narrators’ stories; Silberman observes, “June’s presence, that is, her absence, haunts the book. The oppressive weight of her death is not exorcised until the final page” (104). As we read the novel we cannot help but recollect her tragic, puzzling death in the book’s first section, “The World’s Greatest Fisherman.” When we reach the final section, “Crossing the Water,” and read about Lipsha’s taking his mother home, we cannot help but think back on the book and realize how, indeed, June has been a vital force throughout it.

At the end of the first part of “The World’s Greatest Fisherman,” we read about June’s venturing out onto the icy landscape in what appears to be an act of suicide. After she has a rather unsuccessful date with a man named Andy (who is revealed to be John James Mauser in *Tales of Burning Love*) she ends up deciding to walk back home to her reservation. We are told, “Even when it started to snow she did not lose her sense of direction. Her feet grew numb, but she did not worry about the distance. The heavy winds couldn’t blow her off course. . . . Even when her heart clenched and her skin turned crackling cold it didn’t matter, because the pure and naked part of her went on” (6-7). Not only does her spirit or essence appear to live on beyond her body, but it lives on through those in the community surrounding her life; it is dependent upon others for its going on. Her own borders of identity thus mesh with those of others—as Silberman implicitly points



out, she is the linkage for the narrative parts of *Love Medicine*, and, as I would like to point out, she also plays a vital role for the direction of Lipsha's life in *The Bingo Palace*.

June herself manifests the condition of being utterly cast off: her life is a tragedy. In the section titled "June's Luck" in *The Bingo Palace*, we learn of the sexual abuse which June suffered at the hands of her mother's boyfriend; Van Dyke points out, "Despite [Marie's] mothering of June, June's childhood is so horrendous . . . that she never comes fully into her own power and she eventually chooses death by walking into a blizzard" (139). Indeed, June appears to lack the female power that several of Erdrich's other female characters exhibit, but at the same time she becomes a maternal figure that—though herself a victim of unlucky circumstances—still profoundly affects the lives of those to whom she is connected. Her death affects her son King with utter grief and anger and she comes back to haunt his father, Gordie, in the form of a wounded deer; and it certainly affects her other son, Lipsha, and his father, Gerry Nanapush, as well. But Lipsha tells us the most about how she affects his life beyond the body, for he speaks to us much more than do the others.

Lipsha appears to come to terms with his mother by the end of *Love Medicine*, as he gets ready to cross the Canadian border to help his convict father, Gerry Nanapush, escape once again. He passes over water to bring his mother home much as his mother "walked over . . . water and came home" years before (7). It is a symbolic moment that ultimately highlights Lipsha's embracing and forgiveness of his mother, for he acknowledges her full-heartedly and decides to reconcile his hurt with her own. He tells us,

It's a dark, thick, twisting river. The bed is deep and narrow. I thought of June. The water played in whorls beneath me or flexed over sunken cars. How weakly I remembered her. If it made any sense at all, she was part of the great loneliness being carried up the driving current. I tell you, there was good in what she did for me, I know now. The son that she acknowledged suffered more than Lipsha Morrissey did. The thought of June grabbed my heart so, but I was lucky she turned me over to Grandma Kashpaw.

. . . 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. . . . The morning was

clear. A good road led on. So there was nothing to do but cross the water and bring her home. (333)

His mother has suffered so much that it was best for him not to be raised by her; his connection to her thus must move beyond the harm that she extends to her son. He appears to have looked past the fact that she threw him into a slough as an infant (due to her troubled life, to say the least). He can only “bring her home” through realizing how she is “part of the great loneliness being carried up the driving current” of life itself. June’s maternal power thus cannot ultimately bind itself to her son in a normal, healthy way; instead, he must recognize the profound hurt his mother experienced and spread to others across her path: only by coming to terms with it can he bring her to a place where she herself can be reckoned with by her son.

Erdrich thus gives June Kashpaw more power than we may at first expect to come of a woman who walks to her own death. As Silberman points out, “Instead of a man it is a woman returning home at the beginning. She dies immediately; but the traditional dilemma of the individual—home as freedom versus home as trap—reappears tied to a mystery of identity which is resolved favorably” (108). Most significantly Lipsha provides a means for June to come back “home,” to a place where she truly belongs; she never physically makes it back to the reservation but her absence informs Lipsha’s own life in such a way that she can develop her own powerful presence. In *The Bingo Palace*, she makes a ghostly appearance and helps her son to win the famed bingo van—and thus to shift her son’s luck—thereby causing him to reconsider her place in his life again. He comes to a profound understanding of not only his physical origins but also the origins of all on a deeper level; alone in his room, he realizes these origins. He tells us, “I hear my mother’s voice, feel her touch, and by that I know the truth. I know that she did the same that was done to her” (217). He realizes that “[p]ain comes to us from deep back, from where it grew in the human body. Pain sucks more pain into it, we don’t know why. It lives, and we harbor its weight. . . . We hurt, and hurt others, in a circular motion” (217). Lipsha comes to realize a profound truth through

his mother; he develops not a hatred for her but an understanding of her identity despite the pain that has come of their (physically nonexistent) relationship.

***Lulu Lamartine Nanapush and Fleur Pillager: Like Mother, Like Daughter***

Both Fleur Pillager and her daughter, Lulu, exemplify Erdrich's redefinition of the feminine to the utmost; both women serve as integral forces of power and influence on the reservation even as they are confronted by destructive, colonizing forces that seek to appropriate them to a space of less power. Their strong identities revise any notions we may have about the clean and proper self opposed to the abject, for both women are exceedingly bound up with animal forces as well as with other people. They rework the status quo of the feminine as cast-off from male-centered ideas of being by virtue of their embracing of their femininity; this version of femininity itself redefines the status of woman not as merely a potential source of life-giving but also as a transformative and regenerative force that has the capacity to cross borders of being.

Van Dyke makes the apt observation that "[t]raditionally, the Chippewa went on vision quests and had spirit guardians whose animal characteristics the recipient often took on" and that this traditional act connects to the power of Erdrich's Native American women characters (132). She observes that Fleur, Lulu, Marie, and Zelda embody female power due to each of their own vision quests; therefore, Van Dyke implies that Erdrich's women characters can only come into the feminine once they tap into some sort of animal power. She mentions an interview in which Erdrich calls her characters' female power a "transformational power"; most striking, however, is Erdrich's remark about this power in connection to animal qualities. Van Dyke quotes her, "When in some of the poems, [this transformational power] takes the form of becoming an animal, that I feel is a symbolic transformation, the moment a woman allows herself to act out of her own power" (132; qtd in Bruchac 82). While this does indeed appear in such poems as "The Strange People," it also wends its way into Erdrich's novels. For example, Fleur's taking on of many of the qualities of

Misshepesu, the horned lynx who lives at the bottom of Lake Matchimanito, as well as her bear laugh and her wolf-like grin lends to her a sense of solid identity as a female. Similarly, her daughter's connection to Misshepesu lends this same sense of power to her identity as well. Van Dyke does not explicitly point this out, but those females in Erdrich's oeuvre who do not engage in their traditional heritage and thus neither go on a vision quest nor take on a spirit animal embody a female who has lost her originating potential power. As we will see later, Pauline Puyat—who later names herself Sister Leopolda—serves as an example of this.

In *Tracks* we come to know Fleur as a mysterious and ambiguous woman intrinsically connected to her land on Lake Matchimanito. As discussed in the last chapter, her identity also encapsulates a sense of the sacred due to this connection to the land as well as her connection with Misshepesu and other animal figures. Her sense of the sacred certainly contributes to her strength, but so does her female sexuality and the power she garners from it. When the men at Kozka's Meats rape her in anger, she indeed appears utterly powerless, as Pauline tells us that she cries out for her and Russell, two helpless children bystanders; however, because her sexuality was dishonored, she uses her sacred connection to the environment to wreak total havoc on the meat shop and, in the process, leads the men to the meat locker where all but one dies from cold exposure.

Throughout the rest of *Tracks* we see Fleur wield her femininity with Eli Kashpaw. When Nanapush notices something unusual about Eli one day, Eli has only to say Fleur's name for Nanapush to realize that he is paralyzed and fascinated by her power. Eli tells Nanapush the story of how he first met Fleur, throughout the course of which it becomes increasingly unclear whether Fleur herself was the doe Eli wounded or not. Nanapush tells Eli, "I understand Fleur. I am alone. I know that was no ordinary doe drawing you out there" (42). Eli then relates how he loses sight of the deer only to see it being roasted by Fleur herself. After telling her, "That's mine," she simply

ignores him, leading him to ask if he can have at least half the animal; she looks up from her work only to scorn him (42). Nanapush explains how he is “safe from Fleur because the two of [them] had mourned the dead together” and that he and she are nearly relatives, which is not the case for her and Eli; he warns Eli about her quiet power (43). We are then told that “[Eli] said he didn’t see where she was so dangerous”—he merely sees her as a wild, tired woman, not as the powerful female which she will reveal herself to be; she disguises her ability to capture him beneath a somewhat demure aspect (43-44). All he can think about, as he tells Nanapush, is how he wants her for himself. Little does he realize that he will soon become the hunted rather than the hunter. Fleur’s female power thus draws him irretrievably into herself; she appears not even to try drawing him in, so powerful is her femininity. She reverses the role of woman as hunted and man as hunter, of woman as an object to be won and man as the seeking conqueror: instead, she uses this assumption on Eli’s part to ultimately place him at her own mercy.

When Eli persists in his desire to win Fleur over to himself, Nanapush at one point tells him, “Look here, . . . it’s like you’re a log in a stream. Along comes this bear. She jumps on. Don’t let her dig in her claws” (46). He assumes that Eli follows his advice to keep Fleur “off balance,” but instead he gets word that the two lovers are seen making love seemingly everywhere outdoors. When Margaret, Eli’s mother, spies on them herself one day, she concludes that Fleur is pregnant; however, during Eli’s description of Fleur before he even touches her, Nanapush also concludes that she is pregnant. Whether she has conceived by Misshepesu or by Eli, Lulu nevertheless comes into the world soon after their sexual meetings.

After Pauline seemingly forces Eli to have sex with the young Sophie Morrissey—because she herself draws no passion from him—Fleur nearly drives him mad by refusing him and by taking part in a little cheating herself, the only difference being that she has relations with a non-human creature, Misshepesu. This coupling, monstrous in the sense that she has liaisons with a

mythological creature, contributes to her traditional connection with the land and to her feminine capacity: she engages in an abject affair but it only heightens her strength. Nanapush tells us, “The first time after Sophie, [Eli] stayed away from Fleur only long enough to know he couldn’t” (105). The longer Fleur avoids him, the more he wants her: “the rustle of her skirts” alone causes him to feel almost debilitating passion (105). One night he follows her as she rises from bed and heads down to Matchimanito, only to discover that she dives to its bottom for an inhumanly long period of time. He tells Nanapush, “I was stupid, couldn’t understand. She went there other nights. Sometimes I woke and her hair was a damp braid tossed against me and once, from along her neck, I picked a curl of black weed from the bottom of the lake” (107). He becomes convinced that she is pregnant but that the child is not his own; he declares, “I dreamed how it will look, strange and fearful, bulging eyes, maybe with a split black tail” (108). Nanapush mostly laughs him off, telling him he only need be concerned with winning back Fleur. Fleur has, however, managed to successfully use her sexuality against her lover who has wronged her; she wreaks a kind of vengeance on him for his act with Sophie. Even though she has been seemingly disgraced by Eli’s transgressive act, she nonetheless prevails over him with her female power and her traditional ties to the land.

In *Four Souls* this power becomes evident again. Before she even discovers the home of John James Mauser—the man responsible for stripping her land of the trees—she takes “her mother’s secret name to herself” and thus “name[s] her spirit. Four Souls, she was called. She would need the name where she was going” (2). Later into the novel, just after he tells us how, instead of slitting Mauser’s throat Fleur takes his offer to be his wife, Nanapush details the significance of Fleur’s grandmother, Under the Ground, and her mother, Four Souls (Ogimaakwe), and the spiritual power both these ancestors held. When Fleur “name[s] her spirit” after her mother, “the name was going to do what it wanted with Fleur Pillager [f]rom the beginning, she did not own it. Once she took it, the name owned her” (2, 47). Of the relationship between Fleur and

her mother once Fleur takes on her name, Nanapush tells us that “the other Four Souls lived beneath the life of Fleur Pillager. Her name influenced Fleur’s actions and told her what to do” (57). Fleur’s connection to her mother profoundly affects her life; her mother continues to live on “beneath the life of [her daughter].” By taking on her mother’s name, Fleur acknowledges that she depends upon her mother as she leaves the reservation and seeks to regain her lands; she cannot independently work on her own. But this dependency upon her mother hardly diminishes her own strength; instead, it contributes to her actions in her own living, breathing world. Fleur’s life becomes so informed by her mother that we are left asking the question, “Where does her mother end and Fleur begin?” Thus their boundaries are blurred, reminding us of Kristeva’s declaration about the powerful nurturing force of Woman.

Although Fleur’s life becomes utterly disrupted as she makes the tragic mistake of sending her daughter Lulu to the government boarding school and subsequently becomes ensnared by alcohol, she does not lose her connection to her mother, Four Souls, in the sense that she experiences cultural devastation even while ultimately remaining true to her traditional heritage and, in turn, to her originating female power. After she returns from Minneapolis with her son and wins back her land from the Indian Agent Jewett Parker Tatro, she returns to it; the last we see of her before she enters entirely into the spirit world occurs in the last chapter of *The Bingo Palace*, “Pillager Bones.” She walks across the frozen Lake Matchimanito towards her family and she crosses over from life into death—which is merely another kind of life. We are told, “Her mother, Four Souls, who had given Fleur the burdensome gift of outliving nearly all of those whom she loved, sang quietly with her thin arms open, waiting” (273). She returns to her mother, not without pain; by returning to her mother she returns to her origins as well as symbolically returns to the originating maternal power from which she—and every human being—descends.

Lulu's feminine power closely resembles that of her mother in the sense that her life is embedded in the world around her, including the spirit-world; she shares her mother's connection to the environment. Before Fleur gives birth to her, her sacred connection to the land and the spirit-world speaks loud and clear: "... the stillness finally broke, and then, 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. Perhaps the bear heard Fleur calling, and answered" (59). Eli grows frightened and leaves Nanapush outside the cabin, where he witnesses a drunk she-bear walking past; the animal walks inside the cabin despite Margaret's attempts to keep it out. Nanapush says, "I know that when Fleur saw the bear in the house she was filled with such fear and power that she raised herself on the mound of blankets and gave birth" (60). Pauline shoots the bear, leading it to take refuge back in the woods, but it leaves no tracks, "no trail either, so it could have been a spirit bear," Nanapush tells us, only to add, "I don't know" (60).

After Lulu is born, Margaret and Pauline become certain that Fleur has died; however, after Lulu uttered her first cry, "Fleur opened her eyes and breathed" (60). Thus the life of her child and the implicit connection that she feels with her appears to bring Fleur back to life; in the same way that Fleur comes back to life when her child utters her first cry so too does Lulu gather life from her, for she tells us in "The Island," "I never grew from the curve of my mother's arms" despite Fleur's physical absence from her life (68). We are told in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* that Fleur and her daughter cannot reconcile with one another because of Fleur's fateful mistake of sending her daughter away to the government boarding school; Father Damien cannot force the two to come to terms with one another, as we are told, "You are alike, he wanted to say, alike in your stubbornness. One will not ask forgiveness and the other will not forgive. What use is that? You [Fleur] sent Lulu to the government school and Lulu will never forget" (264). It was "[Fleur's] fate



to chase one thing to lose another. She had regained her land, but lost her daughter” (265). Fleur was offered a choice: revenge for her land, or her daughter, for Lulu tells Nanapush, “Fleur had the choice of saving me, her daughter, or having her revenge” (242). Fleur’s decision to send her daughter away so she could travel to Minneapolis and exact revenge on John James Mauser ultimately severs her relationship with her daughter; Fleur thus casts aside her own living blood due to her single-minded quest to avenge the one who took her lands. She therefore lacks a sense of balance; although she gains back her land she nevertheless comes to experience a profound sense of loss because her daughter refuses to forgive her.

In her article “History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*,” Nancy J. Peterson makes the apt observation that, “As pure Indian, Fleur is a near-mythic figure—a source of inspiration for Lulu, but one that seems beyond emulation. (And this is perhaps why Fleur does not have a direct voice in the narrative.)” (990) Fleur does indeed become a voiceless, absent mother (we only hear her words through others), and this influences Lulu to a great degree. Peterson also remarks that “Fleur’s disappearance and tracklessness at the end of the novel function as a present absence—her absence becomes a haunting presence in the narrative” (as does June, as Silberman notes and Peterson acknowledges) (987). Fleur is “beyond emulation” for Lulu, however, only to the extent that Lulu comes to realize the rift between herself and her mother; like June, she has made mistakes with regard to her children but they nonetheless remember her and honor her. Peterson is also right to point out that Fleur’s identity as a pure, fully traditional Indian woman also tragically marks her and makes her “beyond emulation” for her daughter in the sense that Lulu cannot both emulate and survive were she to follow strictly in the steps of her mother; in order to survive productively, Peterson suggests, one must seek a middle ground between the past and the present, between pure traditional heritage and the inevitable realities of the modernizing world.

But it should not be at all overlooked that Lulu's identity positively depends upon her traditional past, and by embodying this past even while remaining unforgiving of her mother she further emphasizes the powerful connection she bears with her maternal originating force. Van Dyke points out, "Lulu has a potent legacy from her mother. It is almost as if Lulu cannot help but be herself—be in her power" (134). She also argues that Lulu's time in "The Island" represents her own vision quest, a time for her to come fully into her own power; indeed, Lulu's stay on Moses' island fundamentally shapes her, for not only does she bear his child, Gerry Nanapush, but she also comes fully into her own sexual powers; she exhibits an irresistible attraction for her cousin who has become utterly isolated and peculiar, living as he does alone with his cats out on Lake Matchimanito.

Lulu literally ensnares him with her female power, telling us, "He was caught. I had dusted him, chilled him in the shape of my shadow. I had loosened the air. Bent him like a stem of grass marking my trail" (79). At one point he even entrusts to her his real name, "[n]ot the name that fooled the dead, but the word that harbored his life" (81). His mother's appellation for him—his false name—fools the dead so that they will not take him away, too, with the sickness; his true name, whatever it may be, thus must never be spoken, yet he confides it to Lulu on account of her winning him over. She tells us, "I hold his name close as my own blood and I will never let it out. I only spoke it once so he would know he was alive" (82). Lulu therefore brings Moses to life all on account of her female power: she "[takes] down his gravehouse," literally, thus revealing him to himself as alive and not as invisible (81). She gives him life and therefore a sense of regained identity. But life-giver as she is, she is not "immune" to the profound need that must come with such responsibility and with such spiritual awakening. Van Dyke observes, "Lulu's vision quest fills her with the desire for more of the transformational union. It is as if she can never get enough, and how often can one expect such mystical transport?" (136) There are "other results" that come from Lulu's time on Moses' island: "She finds her mother in her understanding of the power she had been

given, and she again hears her mother's voice keeping her from harm. As a result of her liaison with Moses, she gives birth to Gerry Nanapush, the magical trickster whom no jail can hold" (136). Van Dyke then goes on to say that it is through "[Lulu's] exuberant animal-like sexuality [that] she has eight children, all by different fathers, some of them married to her and some not"; however, saying that Lulu has "animal-like sexuality" only hints at the more fundamental reasons why Lulu engages in so many sexual liaisons (136).

Lulu tells us that she hurts, that she has an utter *need* within her that underlies all. Later in the novel, when she is older, she tells us in "The Good Tears," "I was in love with the whole world and all that lived in its rainy arms" (272). She "let[s] everything inside," even the most mundane things: "I'd look out on my yard and the green leaves would be glowing. I'd see the oil slick on the wing of a grackle. I'd hear the wind rushing, rolling, like the far-off sound of waterfalls. Then I'd open my mouth wide, my ears wide, my heart, and I'd let everything inside" (272). Her need—or underlying want—to attain a better sense of completion via the outside world does not, however, degrade her female power in the least; in fact, it contributes to it. By virtue of her recognition that she embodies not a closed-off self, Lulu enacts an awareness of both the interconnection of all being and its foundations. Kristeva tells us, "There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (5). After her formative experience with Moses Lulu says she did "not leave undamaged" and that she still "hurt[s]": she realizes her utter incompleteness and therefore comes to some sense of abjection. This hurt takes the form of an absence within, one which nevertheless itself creates a significant, formative presence.

Lulu enacts her female power not by ignoring this sense of abjection but rather by incorporating it into her life; in all that she does she realizes her profound need and emptiness when left alone. The last thing she wants is a sense of her own separated self. Her female sexuality in

particular gives her a means of maintaining a definitive sense of intertwining her own being with that of others. In “The Good Tears” she tells us, “I’m going to tell you about the men. There were times I let them in just for being part of the world” (273). Several pages later she tells us, “I know the grand scheme of the world is beyond our brains to fathom, so I don’t try, just let it in” (278). She knows that the “scheme” of all life *cannot* be understood through a series of constructions, whether they be “[n]umbers, time, inches, feet” or any other device “for cutting nature down to size”: “All through my life I never did believe in human measurement,” she admits, thus providing a means of showing us why she feels the incessant need to mesh herself into the surrounding world (277-278). Her femininity provides her the means of coming to a fuller understanding of the inter-dependent relations of everything, including herself.

Lulu lets men cross her border then on account of their own connection to the rest of the world; however, she also lets this occur because it points to a spiritual aspect of her own being in relation to others. She continues, “I believe that angels in the body make us foreign to ourselves when touching. In this way I’d slip my body to earth, like a heavy sack, and for a few moments I would blend in with all that forced my heart” (273). When she touches others—men in particular—she comes to know the dependency upon which her own life rests; sexual encounters allow her the opportunity not just to embrace life but rather to come to know the honored position which she, as a female, holds in her ability to nourish life through connecting to men and the life-force that runs through such connection; it goes beyond mere sexuality. Of course, she also uses her sexual power to get her way when needed. When the tribal council tries to take her small parcel of land from her in order to build the tomahawk factory, she uses the fact that she has borne many of the children of the tribe’s men to her advantage: “Every one of them could see it in my face. They saw me clear. Before I’d move the Lamartine household I’d hit the tribe with a fistful of paternity suits that would make their heads spin. Some of them had forgotten until then that I’d even had their son. Still

others must have wondered” (281). She comes to the realization that she holds power over the men in her life in more ways than one.

***Pauline Puyat and Marie Kashpaw: The Harm and Possible Healing of Disowning***

In the second section of *Love Medicine*, titled “Saint Marie,” we read about a young girl in a convent and the brutal Sister Leopolda who physically abuses her even as she claims that she is saving her from Satan and the fires of hell. In *Tracks* we are even more astonished when we discover that Sister Leopolda’s real name is Pauline Puyat and that she is in fact Marie’s mother—as much as she vehemently disowns her. While Fleur and Lulu reveal a relationship based on ties to the mother (as much as Lulu claims not to forgive her), Pauline and Marie reveal a relationship based on a complete lack of nurturing and more on a power-struggle. Both mothers impact their daughter’s lives, as well as the lives of others on the reservation, but in completely different ways: whereas Fleur enacts her own traditional Ojibwe awareness, Pauline outright tramples on her own; while Fleur embraces her sense of femininity and life-giving in connection with her traditional beliefs, Pauline favors Catholic law above her own child, her physical female sexuality, and any foundational sense of femininity.

In her article “Catholic Nuns and Ojibwa Shamans: Pauline and Fleur in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*,” Michelle R. Hessler remarks that “Fleur upholds the traditions of her ancestors and attempts to save their land from the rapid advance of white civilization, whereas Pauline enters a cloister, denies her Native American heritage, and brings death and destruction to the reservation” (40). This difference lies at the core of these two women’s relationship, indeed, but it also inherently impacts each woman’s female power. Fleur’s femininity draws strength from a greater whole outside of her, whereas Pauline’s femininity becomes stifled and oppressed by her desire to be a nun and by her perversion and exaggeration of Catholic beliefs. One woman embodies the feminine and the maternal to the utmost, whereas the other chooses a Western religion’s law over everything else.

Both women can be viewed as representing the opposing poles of being: the abject and the Law. (As we have seen, the sacred and the Law do come together in Judaic Christianity, but the two are ultimately opposing concepts, for in Native thought the sacred and Western notions of the abject co-inhere.) The abject embodies a place of ambiguity, a confronting of the maternal, and the Law embodies a realm of separation from and denial of the maternal, ignoring as it does the intermixture of identities that constitutes the nourishment of life. In the fourth chapter of *Powers of Horror*, titled “Semiotics of Biblical Abomination,” Kristeva points out the separating effect of the Biblical Law: the “opposition [of pure and impure], even though it is not absolute, is inscribed in the biblical text’s basic concern with separating, with constituting strict identities without intermixture” (93). The book of Leviticus, for example, exhibits this incessant concern with separation according to the Law. Separation occurs, Kristeva tells us, not only in the domain of sacrificial protocol and dietary restrictions, but also in relation to the feminine. She tells us,

A brief and very important chapter of Leviticus, chapter 12, is inserted between those dietary prohibitions and the expansion of their logic to other domains of existence. Between the theme of food and that of the sick body (Leviticus 13-14), the text will deal with the woman in childbed. Because of her parturition and the blood that goes with it, *she* will be ‘impure’: ‘according to the days of the separation for her infirmity shall she be unclean’ (Leviticus 12:2). If she gives birth to a daughter, the girl ‘shall be unclean two weeks, as in her separation’ (Leviticus 12:5). To purify herself, the mother must provide a burnt offering and a sin offering. Thus, on *her* part, there is impurity, defilement, blood, and purifying sacrifice. On the other hand, if she gives birth to a male, ‘the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised’ (Leviticus 12:3). Circumcision would thus separate one from maternal, feminine impurity and defilement; it stands instead of sacrifice, meaning not only that it replaces it but is its equivalent—a sign of the alliance with God (99).

Such is the Biblical Law with regard to the feminine: the female embodies a decidedly unclean presence, especially when she gives birth. She declares that “Biblical abjection thus translates a crucial semantics in which the dietary, when it departs from the conformity that can be demanded by the logic of separation, blends with the maternal as unclean and improper coalescence, as undifferentiated power and threat, a defilement to be cut off” (106). This same underlying

conception of the female as a threat to one's clean and proper self also plays into the Western conception of the sexes as well, one that is based on a patriarchal view of the world.

Pauline takes this casting off of the feminine to the extreme: in her efforts to throw off her traditional Ojibwe heritage she opts not only for Catholic Law but also for her own utterly maniacal form of it, going so far as to try to abort her child in her efforts to become a nun, wedded to God. As with Fleur, Pauline's feminine sexuality is fundamentally tied to her own religious worldviews; the problem with Pauline is that she casts off her sexual nature in favor of embracing Catholicism fully. She does not even seek a reconciliation between an Ojibwe and a Christian worldview but instead becomes so closed-minded in her rejection of—her ab-jecting of—traditional Native beliefs that she loses her female power and ultimately her sanity. In her essay titled “Pauline Puyat, Historical Trauma and *Tracks*,” Connie A. Jacobs makes the argument that this loss of sanity comes from her own exposure to historical trauma: “She has identified with the oppressor in the form of the Catholic Church, not realizing she is symbolically replicating the pain inflicted upon her tribe” (44). She cannot come to terms with the trauma inflicted on her and her Native heritage (mixed-blood though she is) and thus she becomes “a literary reminder of the degree to which victims of historical oppression can act out their trauma” (47). Pauline becomes such a destructive force on the reservation because, perhaps, she cannot cope with her own psychological trauma, but more importantly she comes to embody all the destructive implications of repudiating her feminine nature.

In the second chapter of *Tracks* Pauline tells us of her decision to become more white than Indian at a young age: “We [the Puyats] were mixed-bloods, skimmers in the clan for which the name was lost. In the spring before the winter that took so many Chippewa, I bothered my father into sending me south, to the white town [of Argus]. I had decided to learn the lace-making trade from nuns” (14). Her father tells her, “‘You’ll fade out there,’” to which she replies “‘Then maybe I won’t come back’ . . . I wanted to be like my mother, who showed her half-white. . . . That was because

even as a child I saw that to hang back was to perish. I saw through the eyes of the world outside of us. I would not speak our language” (14). She wants nothing to do with the other half of her heritage. When her family dies during the consumption outbreak she does not seem too troubled, but merely keeps at her work at Kozka’s Meats. When Fleur shows some motherly affection towards her and Russell, one night in particular as she puts them to bed, Pauline tells us, “Since that night. . . I was no longer jealous or afraid of her but followed her close as Russell, closer, stayed with her, became her moving shadow that the men never noticed, the shadow that could have saved her” (22). But instead of trying to save her the night the men take revenge on Fleur’s poker skills by raping her, Pauline simply tries to ignore what happens before her very eyes. When Fleur’s tornado comes to wreak havoc on the meat shop, Pauline locks the men in the ice locker and thus directly murders them, something which gives her inescapable nightmares. Hessler makes the excellent point that, “In comparison to Fleur, Pauline does not return to the reservation to re[e]stablish ties with the community, but rather to escape the recurring nightmares of her vengeance-seeking victims” (41).

Indeed, Pauline tells us, “I left Argus because I couldn’t get rid of the men. They walked nightlong through my dreams, looking for whom to blame. Pauline! My name was a growl on their lips. A suspicion, a certainty, an iron hook on a rail” (62). When Bernadette Morrissey and Napoleon, her brother, both well-to-do mixed-bloods, come down to Argus to trade for items, Pauline—orphaned now and alone—agrees to return with them to their farm to work. Napoleon begins to pay attention to her, despite her lack of physical beauty, and this awakens her curiosity about men. At one point she notices the attraction between Fleur and Eli and it contributes to her own awareness of her female sexuality as well as to her seeing Napoleon in a new light: “Instead of the grizzled hairs and hard-set mouth, I noticed his strong hips, the width of his neck” (72). They meet in an abandoned house in the woods and have sex; but Pauline hardly develops feelings of love



for him. She admits that she merely had a “yearning eagerness” about sex—Napoleon happened to consent to taking her virginity (72). Eventually, Pauline wants to take Eli from Fleur, telling us that she “was drawn by Eli’s heat”; but when she tries to make advances towards him he expresses no interest in her whatsoever (76).

Instead of leaving Eli alone, Pauline uses Sophie Morrissey to seduce him in an attempt, as Hessler observes, “to assert dominance over Fleur” (42); thus her manipulations to get Eli to cheat on Fleur have much more to do with her skewed sense of herself than they do with any true feelings for him. Sexual unions for Pauline amount to a power struggle, just as her interactions with her daughter later in her life will amount to a power struggle as well; of her sexual act with Napoleon, she says: “I snapped him in my beak like a wicket-boned mouse. He crushed me to a powder and spread me across the floor” (73). Her manipulations of Sophie and Eli also amount to a power struggle, for in so doing she is only interested in exerting some control over Fleur’s situation. As before mentioned, however, Fleur hardly lets Eli’s transgression bother her, for she merely uses her physical sexuality to make him want her even more than before.

When the distraught Sophie runs to Fleur’s cabin, Pauline declares that “it was Fleur’s purpose that the girl plunged toward” her cabin by Matchimanito (87). Eventually, Sophie’s brothers Napoleon and Clarence call for the priest, desperate to wake their sister from her trance. Sister Saint Anne approaches Sophie with a small statue of the Virgin Mary; what follows profoundly affects Pauline. She claims that the statue sheds tears, “which no one else notice[s]” (94). After Sophie’s brothers force her up off the ground, Pauline remains kneeling before the statue, unable to draw herself away from the Virgin’s gaze. She tells us,

For many months afterward I brooded on what I’d seen. Perhaps, I thought at first, the Virgin shed tears as She looked at Sophie Morrissey, because She herself had never known the curse of men. She had never been touched, never known the shackling heat of flesh. Then later, after Napoleon and I met again and again, after I came to him in ignorance, after I could not resist more than a night without his body, which was hard,

pitiless, but so warm slipping out of me that tears always formed in my eyes, I knew that the opposite was true.

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

She thus comes to view the Virgin's tears as tears of knowing the frailty of the flesh: she believes that the Holy Virgin weeps because she knows the loss that results from knowing men—in her case, knowing God and having been impregnated by the Holy Spirit. Pauline views female sexuality not as something to be shared, but as something that can only be intruded upon and that needs be cloistered up, locked away, ignored altogether. She has trouble viewing anything out of the scope of patriarchally-based Catholicism. Karla Sanders notes that “[n]ot only is St. Mary a mere figurehead of female religious power, but western culture also stresses Mary's virginity, thus, negating her sexuality” (136). This passage puzzles the reader so much because Pauline appears to be equating Mary's Immaculate Conception itself with something that causes pain: in other words, so fixated is Pauline on Mary's virginity that she appears to view the aspect of Mary's physical motherhood with some species of horror (in the Kristevan sense), saying that Mary comes to know pain because she is “planted in the dirt,” a fleshly (womanly) being.

When Pauline discovers that she is pregnant, she does everything she can to abort the child because she becomes so averse to her physical capabilities: “. . . since I had already betrothed myself to God, I tried to force it out of me, to punish, to drive it from my womb” (131). She has become so fixed on her religious view of herself as nun “betrothed . . . to God” that she tries to extinguish the life inside of her—the ultimate result of her repeated consensual sex with Napoleon. She punishes herself through food deprivation and selfishly tries punishing her unborn, innocent child. Hessler makes the apt remark, “Bearing an illegitimate child would have extinguished her chances of becoming a nun by confirming the widespread prejudice that Indian women, due to their dark skin,

are exceedingly promiscuous. Pauline deviates from traditional Catholic beliefs which states that abortion constitutes a mortal sin and that a mother, like the Virgin Mary, should lovingly care for her children” (42). Pauline instead completely throws off her female sexuality and any hints of it—including a child growing in her womb—in her quest to personify a nun, one connected to a God outside of this world rather than in it. When Bernadette catches her pushing violently against her stomach with the handle of an axe, she makes Pauline promise not to try killing the child again; Bernadette watches over her and even bestows a name on the child: “Marie, she said, named for the Virgin. I knew different. Satan was the one who had pinned me with his horns” (133). In Pauline’s mind, her sexual acts amount to no more than Satan possessing her, forcing her to do something unholy before God.

Even at the birth scene, all Pauline can think about is separating herself from her child. As Pauline pushes in labor, Bernadette grabs the child’s head with two spoons, “wrench[ing] her into the world” (135). Pauline declares, “We were divided”; even when Bernadette tries putting the child to Pauline’s breast she refuses, telling us “the child was already fallen, a little dark thing, and I could not bear the thought” (136). Her obsession with whiteness and her Catholic view of herself as a nun enacts an ultimate separating effect between herself and her daughter; her child, fathered by another mixed-blood, comes out dark in the sense that she resembles an Indian too much and also in the sense that she is a thing born of pure sin, at least in Pauline’s mind. Her view of the child begotten in the midst of sexual passion hardly resembles that of Lulu or Fleur, to say the least.

Her daughter thus grows up completely isolated from her mother until she makes her way to the Sacred Heart Convent to be a nun. In her first section of *Love Medicine* she tells us, “I was going up there on the hill with the black robe women. They 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” (43). Raised by “her aunt,” Bernadette Morrissey, she thinks of herself more as a Catholic white than as an Indian.

More than anything she wishes to prove to the nuns that, though part Indian, she can be the purest, most devout Catholic: “. . . they never thought they’d have a girl from this reservation as saint they’d have to kneel to. But they’d have me” (43). Marie learns, however, that such a task is not as easy as she previously thought when Sister Leopolda—her biological mother—comes into her life and exerts a powerful religious force upon her. Leopolda singles out Marie as the child most tangled up with Satan and inflicts physical harm on her to drive him out. Marie tells us, “She always said the Dark One wanted me most of all, and I believed this. I stood out. Evil was a common thing I trusted. Before sleep sometimes he came and whispered conversation in the old language of the bush. I listened. He told me things he never told anyone but Indians. I was privy to both worlds of knowledge” (46). At one point Marie hears “the Dark One” rummaging around in the back of the classroom; she smiles, only to be noticed by Leopolda who throws her oak pole into the closet and drives it “through his heart” (46-47). Marie becomes shocked by the incident, describing her mind as filled with “[l]oss and darkness” (47). She becomes terrified as Leopolda violently grabs her and tells her, “‘He *wants* you. . . . That’s the difference. I give you love”” (48). But for Marie Leopolda’s love—and God’s love—is nothing more than the sister’s “black hook” and “[t]he spear singing through the mind” (48). She realizes that all Leopolda desires is her control of Marie’s heart in order to make it “an empty nest where she could lurk” (48). Leopolda—Pauline—thus fundamentally cannot be a mother to Marie because of her maniacal focus on placing and on being the Law within her child’s heart.

After Leopolda’s abuse Marie views her more as an enemy that she wishes to be rid of, going so far as to wish her in hell. Marie eventually leaves the convent, but not without a physical reminder of her struggles with Leopolda: a scar cut deep into her palm. Not only does the mark resemble the marks in Christ’s hands but, ironically, it also represents Leopolda’s own utter casting off of her child and the mother-daughter relationship she should have embraced; indeed, Leopolda’s

religious fervor ultimately causes the daughter whom she has cast off to resemble Christ more than she does herself. The reader realizes that Leopolda has marked her child in much the same way as Christ Himself was marked: she acts against her religion in this way in her own maniacal pursuit of it, going so far as to ignore her earthly position as a mother in order to reach some higher, purer spiritual state.

Although Marie grows up without her mother she nonetheless becomes a nourishing and powerful force on the reservation; as she leaves the Sacred Heart Convent, she happens to chance upon Nector Kashpaw in the section titled “Wild Geese.” Eventually, the two marry, and Marie lives on the reservation. Van Dyke observes,

Marie turns her considerable powers to making her husband Nector one of the most respected men on the reservation—the tribal chairman—and to keeping his drinking under control. She mothers her own children and those discarded by others such as June and Lipsha. As a respected elder on the reservation, she returns to ‘the old language, falling back through time to the words that Lazarres had used among themselves, shucking off the Kashpaw pride, yet holding to the old strengths Rushes Bear had taught her’ (LMN 263). Her mother-in-law Margaret Rushes Bear Kashpaw had given Marie and subsequently, Zelda, the strength to be attuned to their own powers as women and to reject the Euro-American image of women as weak and helpless and herself as marginal—a dirty Lazarre. (139)

Indeed, Marie becomes a woman quite unlike her biological mother largely due to Margaret Rushes Bear Kashpaw. When Marie gives birth to her last child, Rushes Bear comes to help; as she helps the younger woman through the birthing process, she tells Nector that Marie is her daughter. Marie tells us that after this incident, “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” (101). Thus Marie finds a mother after all, one with whom she has a strong connection though not by blood—a distinctly Native view of the power of relationships. Furthermore, she and Lulu become friends despite Lulu’s affair with Nector; both women ultimately share a harmonious relationship on the reservation. Most poignantly, Marie becomes a care-taker to Lulu after her extensive eye operation. Lulu tells us she “never shed one solitary tear” in all her life;

but Marie puts artificial tears into her eyes after her eye operation (273). Both women mourn Nector's recent death, but harbor no enmity. Indeed, Marie takes in Lulu much as she took in her adopted children. Lulu tells us that, as Marie takes off her eye bandages, "She swayed down like a dim mountain, huge and blurred, the way a mother must look to her just-born child" (294). She nourishes Lulu just as she has nourished others in the years before.

***Father Damien Modeste, Powerful Woman of God?***

Father Damien Modeste embodies perhaps *the* most enigmatic female character in Erdrich's oeuvre. Father Damien appears in *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*, and we assume that he is, in fact, well, a male priest. But in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* we read about the real identity of this supposed man: he is actually a she, and her name is Agnes DeWitt, a woman who (like most all of Erdrich's other characters) has had her own share of personal hurt, love, and self-awakening. Throughout the novel, she keeps her true identity a secret while simultaneously exhibiting a willingness to mesh both Catholic and Ojibwe beliefs. Her female power—while disguised as a man—nonetheless becomes evident as we read her story; due to her socio-historic circumstances, she must live as a man in order to exert any recognizable influence once on the reservation of Little No Horse. The novel is as much about the question of whether Sister Leopolda should be canonized as it is about the many admiring qualities of Father Damien/Agnes DeWitt.

In Part One, titled "The Transfiguration of Agnes," we read about Agnes DeWitt's tragic past: how she is a nun in love with her piano and Chopin, how she stumbles upon Berndt Vogel and has a passionate, happy relationship with him, and how he is taken away by a reckless notorious gangster in a chance shootout after he kidnaps Agnes. When a terrible flood comes, she manages to survive and eventually finds the dead body of the priest Father Damien Modeste. Because she has literally lost everything, she decides to take his clothes and make her way to the Ojibwe reservation, where she knows he was heading. She has fears about doing this, but ultimately decides she has

done what needed to be done: “There would be times that she missed the ease of moving in her old skin, times that Father Damien was pierced by womanness and suffered. Still, Agnes was certain now that she had done the right thing. Father Damien Modeste had arrived here. The true Modeste who was supposed to arrive—none other. No one else” (65). Despite her femininity she thus comes to embrace her position as what everyone supposes to be that of a man.

But even though she accepts her position wholeheartedly, she nonetheless experiences some sort of identity crisis. We are told, “She transformed herself each morning with a feeling of loss that she finally defined as the loss of Agnes” (76). She has a lost sense of self: “Between these two [Father Damien and Agnes DeWitt], where was the real self? It came to her that both Sister Cecilia and then Agnes were as heavily manufactured of gesture and pose as was Father Damien. And within this, what sifting of identity was she? What mote? What nothing?” (76). But instead of becoming utterly vexed about it, she concludes that “[Father Damien] would be Agnes’s twin, her masterwork, her brother” (77). She comes to a peaceful reconciliation that seems based on a belief that she can construct herself as she will; she realizes that her true or “real” self encapsulates some “sifting of identity,” some undefinable entity from which she builds, or constructs, her identity as others perceive it. What she experiences is a sense of abjection, for she is neither here nor there but wandering through a spectrum of being; indeed, Kristeva tells us, “The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being” (5). She knows the void upon which rests her core self, and it does not frighten her in the least. Rather, she acknowledges it instead of ignoring it.

In her essay titled “L/G/B/T/Q etc. Sensibility in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*” Patrice Hollrah makes the excellent point that “Agnes understands that the true core of a person does not necessarily have anything to do with inherent gender traits but rather is more of an

androgynous, or genderless, entity that she can construct however she chooses” (112). Hollrah leaves out, however, the spiritual dimension of this which certainly ties into Father Damien/Agnes DeWitt’s sense of self. We are told that she actually longs to become nothing, to become enmeshed in the whole of creation: “[Agnes] preferred the Ojibwe word for praying, *anama’ay*, with its sense of a great motion upward. She began to address the trinity as four and to include the spirit of each direction—those who sat at the four corners of the earth. Wherever she prayed, she made of herself a temporary center of those directions. There, she allowed herself to fall apart.” Through allowing herself to “fall apart,” Agnes knows she can be “[d]isintegrated into pieces of creation, which God might pick up and turn curiously this way and that to catch the light. What a relief it was, for those moments, to be nothing, a smashed thing, and to have no thought or expectation” (182). In truth, she resembles Lulu in this desire to be, as Lulu puts it, “a piece of the endless body of the world” (283). And we must remember that this desire for disintegration and integration into a greater whole ties into the feminine dimension—or foundation—of the Native conception of the universe itself. Allen tells us, “The American Indian universe is based on dynamic self-esteem, while the Christian universe is based primarily on a sense of separation and loss. For the American Indian, the ability of all creatures to share in the process of ongoing creation makes all things sacred” (57). Agnes recognizes the loss which underlies her own identity and then decides to mesh herself into the greater whole of which she is a part even while remaining, on some level, Catholic; she meshes the two religions together by virtue of realizing her own nothingness when she stands alone. Only when she connects to others is she able to construct her own identity, ambiguous as it is.

Hollrah correctly points out that “[a] sense of both gender constructions, Agnes and Damien, is always present” and that Erdrich allows women, particularly Agnes, “to engage in an endless number of possibilities, including changing gender identities and sexual orientations throughout their lives,” but she leaves out the underlying feminine nature of Erdrich’s most peculiar



female character (112, 115). Indeed, Agnes acts both man-like and woman-like as she meshes together her Catholic religion with that of the Ojibwe, but she garners her power not merely by possessing the ability to shift identities and her own gendered conception of herself; we must not overlook the feminine nature of even her shifting identity. She remains firm in her love for men, nagging as it may be; for example, her sexual relationship with Gregory Wekkle gives her a sense of completeness. On the night they first have sex, she has “a willing despair to be discovered” and we are told of the disintegrating/integrating power that she knows she will gain from such a union: “. . . her body slipped its boundaries of skin. Darkness sifted through her and she rose toward him, light, powerful, and calm” (200). We are later told that “[h]er womanness crouched dark within her—clawed, rebellious, sharp of tooth,” unable to be fully tamed, tying itself to the profound pain that seems to rack her and drive her passion—both religious and personal (209). Her skin houses two genders, indeed, one male and one female, but it is the female that allows her to reconcile these two entities.

Her final moments strongly resemble Lulu’s own journey to Moses Pillager’s island in that she not only literally travels out to his island on Lake Matchimanito but she also comes an awareness of her own being:

No matter what she’d done, no matter how many souls saved or neglected, no matter if she’d betrayed her nature as a woman or violated the vows of the long dead original Father Damien, her life was vapor, a thing of no substance, one note in the endless music, one note that faded out before the listener could catch its shape. Who was this Agnes, or this Damien, this overlay of leaves and earth? Her brain filled with a sound like the terrible jeering of sparrows in the eaves of the church. Her life was vast in its purposelessness, and yet confined to the narrow spectrum of her senses. (347)

She cannot help but realize the “darkling rage” she contains about her life, about the pain she has undergone—including not bearing children with Berndt—and “her losses and stuffed desire” in general (347). She dwells on the pain of not knowing why she could not have lived her life as she had planned with Berndt, on the pain of not knowing the grand scheme and meaning of even her

own life, but finds comfort nevertheless in reaching out towards the “utter emptiness” that surrounds and underlies her own being (350). Her faithful servant, Mary Kashpaw, finds her dead body and buries her in the lake. Interestingly, the final words of the novel seem to point us towards the feminine part of Agnes’s own being: “As the sky filled with light, [Mary] watched the old heavy rowboat slowly fill and then sink. Father Damien’s slight figure, serene in its halo of white hair, lay just under the waves. As the dark water claimed him, his features blurred. His body wavered for a time between the surface and the feminine depth below” (351). He (She) thus ultimately goes back into her own feminine nature, which has never quite disappeared even throughout her time disguised as Father Damien; it has always lain there within her, but because she has had to live in disguise, it, to use Kristeva’s words, has “[lain] there, quite close, but it [could not] be assimilated” (1). Her female nature was abject to the male identity that she superficially assumed, but it nevertheless powerfully contributed to her actions as Father Damien, informing her life about the pain that can come from love (with Berndt, Gregory Wekkle and others in her life, including those on the reservation), the wholeness that can come from not separating one’s self but rather by incorporating it into surrounding creation, and, finally, the feminine/maternal entity of nourishing, connecting, and contributing to life that underlies all.

### *Chapter Three*

#### *“To see a thing so perfectly what it is”: Love in Erdrich*

“What is the whole of our existence . . . but the sound of an appalling love?” —Father Damien Modeste II/Agnes DeWitt, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*

Just as the feminine, the sacred, and the mundane provide a strong foundation for Erdrich’s writing, so too does love in all its multitudinous forms contribute to this foundation. Erdrich seems preoccupied with exploring the idea of love in all of her works, showing it at its best and at its worst; she helps us to see that love can powerfully inform a person’s life decisions and cause healing and reconciliation to occur but that it can also cause profound pain. Love is an undefinable, binding force that is felt and known but that nevertheless remains elusive and mysterious; it lies at the foundation of our collective existence, for in its complete absence life as we know it could not exist. Erdrich shows how love never leads a person to ultimate fulfillment even as it gives that person a sense of connection. Agnes DeWitt asks, in her peculiar sermon to the snakes, ““What is the whole of our existence . . . but the sound of an appalling love?”” (226) Erdrich’s oeuvre itself points out the ““appalling”” love that is ““the whole of our [and her characters’] existence,”” for love has the potential to wound, heal, and fascinate us with its power to draw us ever onward even as it never places us in ultimate comfort and fulfillment.

Love in Erdrich is an abject power for it is ambiguous, sucks us in, and causes us to form attachments rather than to effect separations, whether literally or figuratively; in this way, it causes the individual who loves to see himself or herself not as an independent entity but rather as one whose being depends upon that of another. Erdrich’s most seemingly fulfilled and strong characters—such as Lulu and Agnes DeWitt—are also those most devoted to the connecting and merciless force of love. Without love one need not suffer the acute knowledge of self-incompletion,

but at the same time if this awareness is lacking, so too is a truer sense of identity. Pauline, for example, quite literally becomes bereft of love and thus becomes isolated from her community in her effort to redefine her identity—this lack of love only degrades the identity which she could potentially construct.

***Love is Immanent, in the Here and Now***

In her poem titled “Asiniig” Erdrich creates a series of smaller poems that are spoken to us by stones; Erdrich tells us, “The Ojibwe word for stone, asin, is animate. Stones are alive. They are addressed as grandmothers and grandfathers. The universe began with a conversation between stones” (153). In one of the poems, titled “Love,” the stones tell us,

If only you could be more like us  
when it comes to the affections.  
Have you ever seen a stone  
throw itself?  
On the other hand  
whose idea do you think it is  
to fly through the air?  
Mystery is not a passive condition.  
To see a thing so perfectly what it is—  
doesn't it make you  
want to hold it,  
to marvel, to touch  
its answered question? (156)

The speakers make clear that to be human is, indeed, to cause pain and hurt. They ask us, “Have you ever seen a stone / throw itself?” only to point out that humans—imperfect as they are—are the ones who cause pain by figuratively throwing stones at others; but, “[m]ystery is not a passive condition,” rather it is active, constantly moving and breathing, and, with humans, constantly making mistakes and striving. It is mysterious that we know of love in its highest form even as we hurt those whom we love; we wonder why and for what we love only to grasp the answer within the question itself. Human love is, in fact, imperfect; but to realize this is “[t]o see a thing so perfectly what it is.” One cannot help but “marvel” and desire “to touch / its answered question” in all its

variety of forms. A question itself denotes a desire to know, to experience the fulfillment of no longer questioning; love itself is a pull, an attachment that draws spirits and bodies together, and therefore resembles a question in the sense that the person who experiences love desires a fulfillment of it. But the answer is in the questioning itself, for love—like life—is not static but dynamic, always changing and shaping, and with change can come pain.

***Real Love and the (Healing) Wounds that Come with It***

Many of Erdrich's characters exhibit love through a sense of dependency and recognize their own desire to mesh their lives with those of others. Lulu serves as the ultimate epitome of this: her life is profoundly informed by her need and her love for "the whole world and all that live[s] in its rainy arms" (272). Love for Lulu also takes the form of her attachment to her mother. But like the love she harbors for the men in her life, this love is not without pain, for, we will remember, in "The Island" she tells us that she "never grew from the curve of [her] mother's arms" and that she "still wanted to anchor [herself] against her"; however, she adds, "[b]ut she had tore herself away from the run of my life like a riverbank, leaving me to spill out alone" (68). Even though her mother is absent from her life, she still has a love for her. After her time on Moses Pillager's island she comes to an understanding of her deep need and her self-incompletion. This newfound perception contributes to her embracing the world that surrounds her; she does not leave "undamaged," yet she nonetheless comes to a fuller understanding of love in that she knows the need that can gnaw at her (82). What she is left with, in fact, is a sense of *jouissance*, to use one of Kristeva's terms. She tells us, "*jouissance* alone causes the object to exist as such. One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion" (9). She underlines her hurt, telling us that desire is a "poison": it is a pain first, disguised as a desire (82). But through it one can come to a healing. It goes beyond mere physical sex, though it can manifest itself through it; rather, it is an originating want for connection.

Paula Gunn Allen discusses this important aspect of love as an integral and integrating force in *The Sacred Hoop*, in a chapter titled “A Stranger in My Own Life: Alienation in American Indian Poetry and Prose.” She makes the point that one’s relationship to others establishes that person within the community and gives that person a sense of place; “relationship is taken as fundamental to creaturely existence” (127). In Native thought, there is no such thing as one existing completely alone and independent of others; alienation contributes to a lack of self and, Allen suggests, originates due to a lack of love, for “while lovelessness is not usually named by sociologists as an aspect of alienation, it may be the primary factor. . . . without relationships with significant others, meaning, self-esteem, a sense of belonging expressed in the establishment of norms and experienced as a sense of power cannot exist” (143-144). Alienation implies separation, but love implies integration—and through integration a sense of losing one’s separated self. Lulu is right to identify herself as afflicted with a deep hurting, a pain that comes through the foundational loss that underlies all. The only way to mend this loss healthily and effectively comes through a willingness to lose one’s sense of independence through recognition of the wound of *need* that lies at the foundation of our being, that is, a willingness to love and therefore attach one’s own significance to something outside one’s self.

The closest conception of this is found in Kristeva’s discussion of *jouissance*; immersion in love does not amount to desire—one does not want to possess—it, but rather one wants to lose one’s own sense of a separate self in order to achieve a greater sense of being. She tells us that “[o]ne does not know it,” because how can one know that which is undefinable and elusive of human comprehension? “One joys in it” because through it one comes to experience the most profound sense of being humanly possible. Violence and pain come along with it because the self necessarily undergoes a type of wounding even as it is incorporated into a greater whole. Kristeva tells us that this sense “is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter ego*,

drops so that 'I' does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence" (9). This alienation, however, is merely a means of alienation from one's own strictly separated self; one experiences some sense of horror when one's ego becomes so disintegrated. One cannot, however, help but experience fascination in such an abject situation: "One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims—if not its submissive and willing ones" (9).

Erdrich's characters reveal the pain and the joy, the wounding and the integrating force of healing that comes of love; just as Erdrich explores the abject in her portrayal of the sacred, the mundane, and the feminine, so too does she encounter it when delineating love between and among her fictional characters. In short, she appears to agree fully with John Donne's famous declaration in his *Meditation 17*: "No man is an island, entire of itself" (629). Erdrich embraces this idea and reveals all its attendant complexities through memorable characters.

### ***The Perfect Imperfection of Human Love***

As discussed earlier, Erdrich clearly explicates a vision of life in which the sacred and the mundane depend upon one another in a dynamic system where one finds the spiritual in the phenomena of everyday life. She not only takes things commonly viewed as abject in certain situations (such as tadpoles in communion with God) but she also melds entities in order to exhibit abjection from a Western point of view. Because Erdrich continues working within her Native tradition when writing love into her characters' lives, she continues to enunciate the abject in the sense that she emphasizes a world wherein all things co-inhere and form ties to a multitudinous array of people, animals, inanimate objects, and places. The characters who truly love experience the sacred in that they come to an awareness of their own dependency. They long to mesh themselves with a larger whole and thus destroy their individuality from a Western perspective; this intermeshing creates, to use Allen's words, "the Sacred Hoop of Be-ing" (11). Native conceptions of the self and others happen to mesh beautifully with love as Erdrich writes it into her works;

indeed, Erdrich's characters who tap into their traditional heritage come to experience love in some shape or form in their lives. Love and the Native emphasis placed on inter-connection powerfully uphold one another.

But while Erdrich's characters who love help to form the sacred hoop, they also remain aware of their frailty and the realities of everyday life; however, their bodies and their humanity—and therefore their ability to err—seamlessly blend into their love. Lulu for example does indeed ask, “How come we’ve got these bodies?” and realizes that “[t]hey are but frail supports for what we feel,” but her physical female sexuality as well as her rootedness in the world around her nonetheless informs her love—and she knows this (283). In the same way that the sacred depends upon the mundane, so too does love depend upon bodies and therefore frailty. But rather than juxtaposing love to human pain and mistakes, Erdrich blends the two to produce a greater vision of it, one that dynamically lives and breathes and fulfills her characters only because it does not ultimately fulfill them; it keeps them in constant need, and this itself contributes to a more complete sense of self. In her article, “A Healthy Balance: Religion, Identity, and Community in Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*,” Karla Sanders rightly observes that Erdrich’s characters constantly search for a “healthy balance” in their own marginal situation as mixed-bloods and Native Americans. She adds, “The characters who are not healed in this fiction are the ones who either cannot find [a] transpersonal self with a connection to history, community, or spirituality or who have their sense of a past, place, and belief destroyed” (132). The idea of a “transpersonal self” does indeed contribute to healing for Erdrich’s characters, but Sanders fails to note the importance of love—and the pain that comes with it—in the development of such a self. While the self must indeed be connected to its own “history, community, [and] spirituality,” it also must find connection with others in relationships. Erdrich’s fiction, including *Love Medicine*, touches on human love as much as it touches on the importance of



traditional beliefs, and furthermore love—or the lack thereof—profoundly contributes to her characters’ search for a “healthy balance.”

As previously noted, Lulu indeed exhibits love to the utmost in her own constant awareness of and formation of ties. Her mother, Fleur—who, as has been hinted, can be viewed as Lulu’s first love—herself experiences love, and not without pain. In *Tracks* we are told of her relationship to Pillager land as well as her passionate relationship with Eli—and her supposed liaison with the water-man, Misshepesu. Clearly, she loves her Pillager land, else she would not bind herself so strongly to it. As far as her relationship with Eli is concerned, Nanapush tells us in *Four Souls* “Yes, she was *passioned*” (72). In *Four Souls* we are told much more explicitly about Fleur’s own feelings than we are in *Tracks*, for throughout the novel she tries to manage life in the face of her desire to wreak revenge on John James Mauser—the lumber baron who decimated her land—and what appears to be her own compassion or love for the man. Nanapush tells us with certainty, “Whatever tenderness Fleur owned at the time was attached to her child. What love she felt was buried underneath a tree marked by a red flag. Her love was bones, or bound up in loss. No man had truly felt it” (73). It appears that her love lies with her people—whom she buried “underneath a tree marked by a red flag”—and with her daughter Lulu, not with any men in her life. Fleur’s life does indeed become marked by “loss,” and, Nanapush relates, any love, or attachment, she felt was itself enshrouded by a sense of having lost what was once her way of life.

Her intention to kill John James Mauser becomes slowly weakened. When she holds a knife to his neck in order to kill him and thus complete her plan for revenge, she relinquishes her plan for the moment and instead takes his offer to marry her—and decides to kill him at some other point. But, as Nanapush tells us, “The problem was, the closer she got to the man she’d come to destroy, the muddier grew her intentions. She kept putting off his death” (74). Eventually, she bears him a son. Mauser, however, does not remain unaware of Fleur’s peculiar attachment to him.

Throughout the novel, it becomes apparent that Fleur may indeed have compassion for Mauser, but her thirst for revenge ultimately wreaks havoc on her own spirit. It becomes clear that she has become so fixated on the wrongs done to her and her land that she has no room left in her heart for love.

Margaret helps Fleur to understand that she must become vulnerable to love, and helps her to see that, without her daughter and her son, she really cannot do anything. She tells her, “[A]ll the devotion to the land and to your stubborn idea comes to nothing before one truth—your first child does not love you and your second child doesn’t know how.” She asks, “How can they love a mother who forgot to guard their tenderness, and her own? How can they love a woman who can suffer anything and do anything?” Only when Fleur “forget[s] [her] power and [her] strength” can she come to love; she cannot come to a proper sense of love if her spirit bends itself solely to wreaking revenge and gaining justice for her lands (206). We as readers cannot help but cheer on Fleur in her search for retribution, but in the end we realize that such a search drowns out love. Fleur makes the fatefully wrong decision to send Lulu to the government school so she can concentrate on her goal, but in the end she becomes estranged from her daughter (even though, as mentioned earlier, Lulu nonetheless longs for her mother and does love her even as she resents her). When Fleur bears Mauser a son—through accident—she does show affection to the child but less passionately than she plots revenge. Fleur must realize her need for love and not shy away from it nor silence it. The world around her has changed drastically, and she cannot become so consumed with hate for all its wrongdoings to her and her people that it shuts out any propensities for loving.

Margaret herself speaks from experience, for she herself is marked by a headstrong will and a fierce sense of independence; she often appears to have trouble admitting her love for Nanapush (a rather unlikable and difficult man, hilarious as he is). She admits, “No matter how foolishly my husband behaved, no matter how dreadful his mistakes, jokes, and sins, he loved me. In that, my

suspicious woman's heart came to trust" (182). Even when Nanapush becomes consumed with a (ridiculous) hatred for Shesheeb, a "greasy old duck" who he thinks is trying to seduce Margaret, Margaret nonetheless forgives his foolishness—even after she, instead of Shesheeb, is nearly killed by Nanapush's snare set in the woods. She, unlike Fleur, comes to the conclusion that "[r]evenge was beneath the stature [she'd] found as a woman" (181). Instead, she forgives, and tries to translate this sense of a forgiving spirit to Fleur, even though, it must be admitted, Fleur herself has a lot more to forgive than does Margaret. Interestingly, Nanapush forgives Margaret's own temporary obsession with procuring linoleum for their cabin, a compulsion so powerful that she sells off Nector's land for it. Thus with loving must come forgiveness.

Margaret's son, Nector, Nanapush's (adopted) daughter, Lulu, and a "dirty Lazarre," Marie, all become entangled in a love triangle that no doubt causes severe strain on all three characters' lives, but which nevertheless concludes with friendship between Marie and Lulu. As noted earlier, Lulu has a wide-reaching love but she becomes particularly involved with Nector even though she knows he has married Marie. His relationship with Marie—as well as his love for her—occurs quite unexpectedly as she bolts down the hill from the Sacred Heart Convent after her terrifying encounters with Sister Leopolda. After a moment of questionable behavior—it is unclear whether they actually have sex or not—Nector cannot seem to leave her. He tells us, "[h]er [wounded] 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). But even after he marries her, he "cannot let go" of Lulu, either. His efforts to find a middle ground between the two ends up failing miserably; however, even in old age he and Lulu still feel for each other, even as he remains married to Marie.

In the titular section of the novel, Lipsha helps us to understand the difficulties of Marie and Nector's relationship as they both grow older. It gives him "a real shock to the system" to realize the hardships that love can cause two people: "You see I thought love got easier over the years so it

didn't hurt so bad when it hurt or feel so good when it felt good" (230). He witnesses his grandmother's pain at seeing her husband go senile even as he continues to keep up with Lulu. Eventually he and Marie decide that only a love medicine can restrict Nector's feelings to Marie. Lipsha realizes the care that love medicines require, however: "Before you get one, even, you should go through one hell of a lot of mental condensation. . . . You could really mess up your life grinding up the wrong little thing" (237). He demonstrates the danger of "the wrong . . . thing" by getting two frozen turkey hearts instead of the wild geese hearts he originally planned to procure. Nector ends up dying as a result of choking on one of the hearts, but it also has another effect, for it ultimately helps bring Lulu and Marie closer together. With Nector gone, the women can focus on each other and eventually form a solid bond, for Marie cares for Lulu after her eye operation so much so that she becomes a sort of mother figure to her. Thus, the love triangle ends with the mutual forgiveness of the two women involved.

Lipsha himself comes to know firsthand the profound pain that can be caused by love. In *The Bingo Palace* his love for the beautiful Shawnee Ray Toose reaches nearly epic proportions as he spends all his time trying to discover how he can win her from his rival, Lyman Lamartine. In the end, Lipsha and Shawnee Ray do not end up together, but throughout the novel we read about Lipsha's difficulties with striving to love. He eventually comes to learn that he cannot solve his relationship with Shawnee through a love powder. He tells us, "I want everything about Shawnee Ray, even her motherhood. Only, I want her to mother me, to heal me. I've helped stand in the way of her future just as much as Lyman. Between the three of us, including Redford [her son], we've all but torn her into equal pieces" (165-166). In the end he realizes that his love for Shawnee links back to his abandonment by his mother, for as he witnesses Shawnee with her son, he thinks, "[t]he subject makes my throat choke up with envy" (165). While Lipsha does not succeed in winning Shawnee Ray for good, he nevertheless comes to understand his own utter need underlying

his very being; his mother and his father's absence from his life teaches him about this loss:

"There's no return to what was and no way back. There's just emptiness all around, and you in it, like singing up from the bottom of a well, like nothing else, until you harm yourself, until you are a mad dog biting yourself for sympathy" (258-259). He is a tragically marked character searching for love—he cannot win Shawnee Ray's love because he himself hurts so much. Until he learns to give healing himself, he will never win her completely. In this way he resembles Fleur, for both characters must first reckon with their own need and loss before they attempt loving others.

Zelda, Marie's daughter, goes through a similar journey in *The Bingo Palace*. Although she had married Swede Johnson, she had always loved Xavier Albert Toose; she had felt he was wrong for her in that he was apparently less successful than her white husband, Swede Johnson. One night, however, she realizes her deep love for Xavier even as she tries to bury it, to keep it from resurfacing; this realization comes with what appear to be heart attacks, and she sees all that she has denied to Xavier. Van Dyke notes that this amounts to her own vision quest and thus to her own better sense of self-power: "In a series of painful visions connected to heart attacks, she sees that she has denied her own nature, her love for Xavier Toose. . . . even though Zelda has denied her own nature and only accepted it as a mature woman, still she is not weak; she is transformed" (142). At first she reacts in anger at his reappearance, and we are told, "She would never be subject to love, never would be overtaken" (244). But her own assurance in her reason fails; she cannot help but embrace her love for Xavier. She comes to know the "holy fire" that comes of love: "A holy fire exists in all we touch, she thought, even in the flames that fed my father's heart" (245). She thinks back on her witnessing one of the consequences of her father's love—Lulu's house in flames—and, instead of shrinking back from her recognition of the destruction that can come with love, she embraces it. She walks out to meet Xavier in the night and recognizes her love for him.

Finally, Agnes DeWitt's life exemplifies the hurt, the pain, and the healing that comes with love in her own unique way. The first section of part one of the novel, "Naked Woman Playing Chopin," introduces us to a woman who quite literally falls in love with Chopin's music; while at the convent, she plays it with the strength of sexual ardor, for "Chopin's spirit became her lover" (15). Erdrich includes this scene to help us realize Agnes' "desperate, earthly, exacting heart," for, although she dramatically alters her lifestyle once she assumes the guise of a priest, her heart retains the same characteristics even as it experiences changing circumstances (16). During her time on the reservation she comes to a middle ground between Catholic religion and Ojibwe religious belief even as she never ceases to question herself and her existence; even though she comes to love Gregory Wekkle and the Indians on the reservation—including Nanapush, with whom she becomes great friends—she knows a profound loneliness and yearning. We are told, "Her loneliness sometimes seemed a thing not of this world, but a loneliness only that mysterious being, solitary and unique, could understand" (182).

Perhaps the most striking moment of her story comes when we read about her "sermon to the snakes" (226). As she practices her sermon alone in the new church erected on the reservation, snakes come slithering into the building and among the pews; however, she shows little fear of them (despite their typical association with Satan). Instead, she goes on with her sermon, opening with the question, "What is the whole of our existence. . . but the sound of an appalling love?" (226) She continues,

"What is the question we spend our entire lives asking? Our question is this: Are we loved? I don't mean by one another. Are we loved by the one who made us? Constantly, we look for evidence. In the gifts we are given—children, good weather, money, a happy marriage perhaps—we find assurance. In contrast, our pains, illnesses, the deaths of those we love, our poverty, our innocent misfortunes—those we take as signs that God has somehow turned away. But, my friends, what exactly is love here? How to define it? . . .

"Divine love may be so large it cannot see us.

"Or it may be so infinitely tiny that it works on a level where it directs us like an unknown substance buried in our blood.

“Or it may be transparent, an invisible screen, a filter through which we see and hear all that is created.

...

“I am like you,” said Father Damien to the snakes, “curious and small.” He dropped his arms. “Like you, I poise alertly and open my senses to try to read the air, the clouds, the sun’s slant, the little movements of the animals, all in the hope I will learn the secret of whether I am loved.” (227)

Father Damien/Agnes DeWitt thus reveals an uncertainty about the nature of divine love; instead of trying to define it precisely, she keeps herself open to it and to the pain that comes with it. Love can be “appalling” precisely because its nature embodies an ambiguous, perhaps purely unknowable force even as it leads us on and runs through our thoughts and our feelings. Like Lulu and her opening up to “the whole world and all that live[s] in its rainy arms,” so too does Agnes “poise alertly and open [her] senses” in her attempt to understand the nature of love (272, 227). It leaves her hurt, but she does not shy away from it. She keeps searching and, in the process, becomes a saint herself in her own right, a representation of the search for love as a human being, fallen and perfect at once.

*Conclusion: “A globe of frail seeds that’s indestructible”*

In his section titled “A Little Vision” in *The Bingo Palace*, Lipsha makes an observation as simple as it is revelatory; he tells us, “You have to stay alive to keep your tradition alive and working” (221). This realization comes as he thinks about whether or not the building of Lyman’s “bingo palace” on sacred land contributes to the continuance of the tribe and its traditions. While the bingo hall could be a source of income for the reservation, and thus could physically better the tribe’s position, it could also cause the tribe to become more focused on money and less on preserving Native heritage. He realizes that “[o]ur reservation is not real estate, luck fades when sold” and that “[a]ttraction has no staying power, no weight, no heart” (221). This scene—just one of many such scenes in Erdrich—raises a string of questions that the careful reader cannot ignore. “How,” one wonders, “can one most effectively preserve Native American identity? By keeping to the margins in contemporary America? By utilizing white men’s methods—including the making of as money—in order to physically live better? Is ‘Native American’ identity even possible in a (post-) modern world?” The power of Erdrich’s work lies in her ability to effectively engage such questions, unanswerable as they may appear to be. But, like love, the answer to such questions may lie in the questioning itself. Native American identity—marginalized as it may be compared to the greater whole of American society—can *only* survive if it preserves its traditional beliefs even as it encounters contemporary realities.

It is my hope that this thesis has shown that Erdrich’s work revises our notions of the abject, and, by doing so, shows how a heritage so cast-off and suppressed for generations can, in fact, continue to inform the lives of contemporary Native Americans and mixed-bloods; but only by embracing this heritage can it survive. Native thought emphasizes dynamic, not static, relations, the interdependency of all living things, and a spiritual awareness deeply enmeshed in the natural world;



such a worldview, as has already been shown, takes on an abject form, full of ambiguities and melded entities. It differs dramatically from the Western world (and its rational, capitalist order) that has, for centuries, sought to extinguish it; but does such a worldview—and the people who uphold it—survive in the midst of such an oppressive culture? Erdrich shows us that while the pain and the loss experienced by Native people cannot be ignored, it can contribute to their strength and identity. Nanapush tells us at the end of *Four Souls* that, eventually, “all things familiar dissolve into strangeness. Even our bones nourish change . . . even such people as we, the Anishinaabeg, can sometimes die, or change, or change and become” (210). Native American identity can remain only if it “change[s] and become[s]” an identity not of the past but of the present and the future; such an identity must necessarily shift because the world around it has shifted.

This evolution of Native identity does not mean, however, that it will shed the qualities it possessed before it was overridden by the encroaching Western world. It can, in fact, remain strong despite such cultural silencing. At the end of the titular section of *Love Medicine*, Lipsha copes with what appears to be the loss of his “touch,” handed down to him through his Pillager ancestry; the “touch,” however, reappears as he digs up dandelions, a common weed. He tells us, “With every root I prized up there was return, as if I was kin to its secret lesson. The touch got stronger. . . . Uncurling from me like a seed out of the blackness where I was lost, the touch spread. The spiked leaves full of bitter mother’s milk. A buried root. A nuisance people dig up and throw in the sun to wither. A globe of frail seeds that’s indestructible” (254). In a moment filled with latent meanings, Lipsha recognizes that his touch “spread[s]” from his own sense of a “lost” self; his traditional power grows within him as he *encounters* this loss. His own identity as an outcast, a motherless Indian on a reservation, can grow stronger when he realizes that he is “frail” indeed yet “indestructible.” So too can traditional Native identity “change and become” not necessarily a new Native identity, but rather one that becomes more complete as its people encounter all that has been

lost but also all that can be gained from keeping their heritage intact and a part of their daily lives. It is not a matter of choosing between hanging back and going forward, and it is not a matter of simple survival: rather, it is a matter of constantly *becoming* a people.

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