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Family Ties and Generic Transgression in Louise Erdrich's Fiction

1 Volume

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Abstract

The focus of my thesis is to consider the interaction between theme and form in Louise Erdrich's fiction, specifically *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks* and *The Bingo Palace*. It occurred to me, after reading the tetralogy, that the maternal and paternal bonds were not subject to bloodlines; indeed, family ties in Erdrich's fiction, as is the case with Native American tribal family and clan structures, are much more fluid and inclusive. In conjunction with this, the structure of each of the novels seems to reflect the fluid nature of family structures represented. This led me to consider generic classifications particularly Erdrich's relationship with realist and magic realist trends; Alan Velie's article "Magical Realism and Ethnicity: The Fantastic In The Fiction Of Louise Erdrich", is particularly important to this discussion. Therefore, this thesis analyses representations of the family (the mother, father and children), representations of cultural identity (Chippewa and Western) and considers the novel form as the mediator of these representations.



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Abbreviations

LM: Love Medicine (Revised Edition) 1984. Glasgow: Flamingo
HarperCollins, 1993

Tales: Tales of Burning Love 1996. Glasgow: Flamingo HarperCollins,
1997

TBQ: The Beet Queen 1986. Glasgow: Flamingo HarperCollins, 1994

TBP: The Bingo Palace 1994, New York: HarperCollins; Glasgow
Flamingo HarperCollins, 1995

T: Tracks 1988, New York: Harper and Row; Glasgow: Flamingo
HarperCollins, 1994

All quotations are taken from these editions.

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Introduction

The Blue Jay's Dance, Erdrich's memoir about her third pregnancy, is a text in which theme dominates form. The nine-month period of pregnancy and the first few months of mother-child bonding is the time scale which the memoir follows. In the duration of one seasonal year this transitory period is one of great emotional and physical change for Erdrich. However, as I found when considering Erdrich's fiction, and the tetralogy specifically, it is not just her autobiographical work in which form and content become so inextricably linked. *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks* and *The Bingo Palace* have in common the fact that their structure, or form, is acutely determined by thematic concerns, specifically the theme of family ties and cultural continuation.

There already exists a large body of material concerned with Erdrich's representations of women, of mothers, and of Native identity. Additionally, there are continuing debates as to the literary form Erdrich employs in her novels, whether the narratives are concerned with postmodern fragmentation or influenced by the traditional oral storytelling tradition. However, it seems to me that very rarely are these thematic and structural issues dealt with simultaneously, at least not to any significant degree. Yet, as I will argue throughout this thesis, their interdependence is crucial.

The chapters of my thesis are not arranged chronologically in terms of plot or publication. Rather, I have arranged each chapter in accordance with Velie's argument concerning the extent to which Erdrich's work can be categorised as magic realist fiction. After considering Todorov's and Chanady's arguments, Velie concludes:

Magic realism, then, of the sort Erdrich imports from South America, introduces apparently supernatural events into a realistic setting in order to demonstrate the nature of reality as

perceived by Indians, in this case the Chippewa, or Anishinabe, as they call themselves.¹

As becomes apparent when reading the tetralogy, and as Velie indicates, the novels organise themselves in a spectrum from the most realist to the most magic, where the 'magic' is a reflection of the extent to which Erdrich incorporates Chippewa myth and spirituality. The chapters of this thesis are organised around this principle. Thus, Chapter One is concerned with *The Beet Queen*, Chapter Two, *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*, and Chapter Three, *Tracks*.

It is at this juncture that I feel it is necessary to consider the implications of the term "magic realism". In writing this thesis, I have had great difficulty in determining Erdrich's relationship with magic realism because I feel that, rather like the term "ethnic",² it harbours the suggestion of a Western authoritative norm. That is, 'realism' is encoded by a Western epistemological perspective, and 'magic' represents the "primitive or 'magical' Indian mentality, which co-exists with European rationality."³ Herein lie the potential difficulties manifest in this oxymoron. By positing an epistemological hierarchy, as Chanady undoubtedly does with her provocative (or objectionable as Velie describes it) language, perhaps unintentionally she aligns European rationality with greater access to truth. Therefore, Chippewa spiritual beliefs and unusual happenings, as represented in Erdrich's fiction, are categorised as 'magical' by the reader who does not engage with Chippewa beliefs, or the Catholic faith in miracles. To simplify this argument to its most basic components: the 'magical' aspect is only

¹ Alan Velie, "Magical Realism and Ethnicity: The Fantastic In the Fiction Of Louise Erdrich", *Women in Native American Literature and Culture*. Eds. Castillo and Rosa (Porto: Fernando Pessoa University Press, 1997), p.61.

² Werner Sollors discusses this concept in depth in *The Invention of Ethnicity*. (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). He determines that ethnicity is a modern term which seeks to differentiate between the Western norm and the Ethnic other, thus, insisting on a self / other opposition, which, as is the case with most binary oppositions (for example, white / black, masculine / feminine), promulgates hierarchical social and cultural values.

³ Velie glosses Chanady, "Magical Realism and Ethnicity: The Fantastic In the Fiction Of Louise Erdrich", *Women in Native American Literature and Culture*. Eds. Castillo and Rosa (Porto: Fernando Pessoa University Press, 1997), p.60. Amaryll B. Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic*. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985).

magic, and 'unreal', if it is not part of one's lived physical or religious experience. Consequently, the limits of truth, that is the limits of reality, become culturally divisive. In an interview with Chavkin, Erdrich outlines her own opinion on the matter:

I think that the rage to imitate Marquez has declined. Probably your word unpredictable is more accurate. It is certainly the reaction I would like. The thing is, the events people pick out as magical don't seem unreal to me. Unusual yes, but I was raised believing in miracles and hearing of true events that may seem unbelievable. I think the term is one applied to writers from cultures more closely aligned to religious oddities and the natural and strange world.⁴

Thus, as I will argue in more detail with reference to individual texts in the course of this thesis, the epistemological variants which Erdrich employs harness a resistance to single-perspective reality. Subsequently, the encoded truth and fictional reality become a matter of interpretation, of careful hermeneutic analysis, not a given, culturally autonomous, fact. By destabilising the referent, that is, by destabilising the notion of what is 'real' and what is 'magic', it seems to me that Erdrich problematises the cultural implications of the term magic realism. Although Velie concludes, "(t)he key to magic realism, as Chanady persuasively argues, is the simultaneous presence of conflicting codes"(p.65), and retrieves Chanady from the brink of endorsing Western cultural hegemony, it is clear that the potential of a less interrogative approach harbours the tendency towards cultural superiority and erroneous value judgements.

Erdrich's relationship with the postmodern, or postmodernist, aesthetic, is very much a part of this debate over her relationship with magic realism. As I have argued, to posit European rationality as having greater access to truth endorses a cultural and epistemological hierarchy which is clearly not evident in Erdrich's work. Thus her fiction accommodates:

⁴ Allan Chavkin and Nancy Chavkin (Eds.), *Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris*. (1994. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997) p.221.

(A) style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narrative or ultimate grounds of explanation. Against these Enlightenment norms, it sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures or interpretations which breed a degree of scepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the givenness of natures and the coherence of identities.⁵

Eagleton terms this "postmodernity", (although, undoubtedly, he would not offer this description as a compliment). However, the value of Erdrich's "postmodernity", as Eagleton describes the term, becomes crucial on two counts. Firstly, with respect to the arguments about the appropriateness of the term "magic realism" to Native texts, only by destabilising Western grand narratives, Enlightenment norms and "the (Western) objectivity of truth (and) history", can tribal culture and tribal identity be represented as a "real" living force on its own terms. The alternative is that tribal spirituality is attributed with a "magical" existence dependant on a stabilising Western norm which has sole access to truth. Erdrich's complex relationship with "magic realism" reflects the aims of a postmodern aesthetic which revises the hierarchical distinction between Western and tribal interpretative methodology. In Erdrich's fiction no single group has the monopoly on truth, and in this sense the postmodern aesthetic Erdrich develops is empowering and, according to Vizenor, liberating.⁶

The second important issue relates to Erdrich's engagement with the postmodern aesthetic and its links with anti-essentialist identitarian ideology. One criticism levelled at Erdrich by Silko is the lack of a

⁵ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. (1996, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) preface, vii.

⁶ Gerald Vizenor (Ed.), *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989). In his preface, Vizenor highlights a significant problem concerning the interpretation of the postmodern aesthetic: "Leslie Marmon Silko narrowed the focus of postmodern criticism; she used the word postmodern to mean separation from communal experience in a review of *The Beet Queen* by Louise Erdrich that appeared in the *Albuquerque Journal's Impact Magazine*. The postmodern condition, however, is not literature on trial but a liberation of tribal stories. Silko is precise in one sense, that postmodern attention would 'set language free', but she misleads the reader by saying that postmodern 'writing reflects the isolation and alienation of the individual who shares nothing in common with other human beings but language and its hygienic grammatical mechanisms'."

unified and identifiable tribal voice which, in an ideological context, is necessary to effect political and social change. As Eagleton, again, cogently points out: "Those who are privileged enough not to need to know, for whom there is nothing politically at stake in reasonably accurate cognition, have little to lose by proclaiming the virtues of undecidability."⁷ However, for the "considerable number of Native people who exist in conditions of politically sustained subalternity"⁸, a unified voice is crucial to establishing collective opposition to Native cultural erasure and Western cultural hegemony. Krupat discusses this kind of opposition as a rhetorical strategy which necessitates a 'them' and 'us' approach to cultural identity. It is true that Erdrich distances herself from this essentialist paradigm since it would be a difficult position to maintain for an individual who acknowledges a dual cultural heritage.

However as my thesis will elaborate, Erdrich does not automatically and unproblematically embrace hybrid cultural identity, nor circumvent the political, social and economic implications manifest in the negotiation of personal and collective identity. Rather, close hermeneutical deciphering reveals true accord with the political and social agenda Silko insists upon: consider Russell Kashpaw's battle scars, Wallace Pef's and Karl Adare's alienation due to their homosexuality (*TBQ*), Henry Lamartine Jr.'s suicide after the Vietnam War (*LM*), the constraints on Shawnee Ray Toose as a young single mother (*TBP*), and Pauline Puyat's mental breakdown when unmediated and essentialist cultural identification proves impossible (*T*). Themes of alienation, dispossession, economic depression and resistance to the erasure of tribal culture are considered with great subtlety in Erdrich's work. The unified, politically active voice does not manifest itself in bloodlines in Erdrich's fiction. Rather, the collective voice, or the pervading 'unity', manifests itself in the fluid family ties (whether through blood or common commitments to one another) and it is at this point that the eclectic, non-unified, and auto-referential aspect of postmodernism is countered. Thus, Erdrich evades

⁷ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. (1996, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p.5.

the dilemmas of essentialism, which serves to promulgate the (now, in the late 20th century, rather arbitrary) binary opposition between cultures, without losing the positive aspect of collectivism.

This thesis focuses on the development of Erdrich's postmodern strategy concentrating on the different ways in which the novels of the tetralogy emerge with a new unity based on inclusive, developing and sustaining family ties. Cultural continuity is an integral part of this rebuilding process, but it does not offer easy answers as there is no return, or access, to unmediated and 'authentic' cultural origins. Indeed, rebuilding lives and families in the wake of alienation and dispossession has broader limits as the geographic and social landscape of *The Beet Queen* illustrates. In this thesis I will explore the interdependence of thematic concerns: that is the representation of family ties and cultural continuance. I will also consider the form of the novels, and show how the structural elements interact with thematic concerns which subsequently involves the consideration of generic classification.

In Chapter One I focus on *The Beet Queen* and the breaking and remaking of family ties. My discussion leads on to a consideration of generic classification since the resolution of the tension between a realist interpretation and the embedded cyclical structure, which is more typical of Native texts, is vital to the emergence of a unified communal voice. That is, the negotiation of different interpretative strategies will be shown to allow for the emergence of a new kind of family which exists in a Western context. Chapter Two focuses on *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*. I use this comparison to resolve the difficulties of generic classification such as the appropriateness of the terms magic realism, novel and short story. By comparing the surface linearity of *The Bingo Palace* with the fragmentation of *Love Medicine* I will argue for a more fluid interpretation of the novel and consider the importance of Native family and clan structures to this process. Finally, I will consider *Tracks*

⁸ Arnold Krupat, *The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism and Culture*. (1996, Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998) p.30.

focusing on paternity in the context of family and spirituality. It is in this novel that Erdrich comes closest to invoking the tribal oral tradition through Nanapush, the 'father figure' of the tribe.

Chapter 1

The Beet Queen: In the Tradition of Realist "Family" Fiction?

The Beet Queen is something of an anomaly in comparison with the other three novels of the tetralogy - *Tracks*, *Love Medicine*, and *The Bingo Palace*. It differs from Erdrich's other novels in that the cultural and geographical landscape is not reminiscent of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation but is more concerned with rural life in the fictional town of Argus in North Dakota. Partly due to this change in cultural context *The Beet Queen* has attracted some radically different responses. Leslie Silko criticises it for lacking in political and historical bite and for the use of a post-modern aesthetic; Russell Banks describes the novel as "structured in an almost classical manner"; and Josh Rubins comments that it is a parody on Fielding's and Dickens's "foundling fiction".¹ More fully developed perhaps are the comments of Hans Bak and Alan Velie. Bak argues that *The Beet Queen* is a novel which "ostensibly fulfils itself wholly within the mainstream tradition of the realist novel" despite values, images and motifs derived from tribal culture. Velie sustains this argument to some extent by suggesting that this novel is Erdrich's least Native American, therefore her least magic realist where the "magic" is deeply rooted in Chippewa epistemology.²

Superficially *The Beet Queen* could be defended as a "realist" novel in the Western tradition. For the most part the narrative develops along a linear time scale. Indeed, Erdrich's range and representation of Chippewa, mixed blood, and white characters who are caught up in the changing cultural and social landscape of reservation and small town life

¹ All these quotations are taken from reviews of the novel. Silko's "Here's an Odd Artefact for the Fairy-Tale Shelf" was first published in *Impact / Albuquerque Journal* October 8 (1986): 10-11, (reprinted in *SAIL* 10 (1986): 177-184.); and is discussed extensively by Susan Perez Castillo in "Postmodernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko - Erdrich Controversy", *The Massachusetts Review* 32:2 (1991): 285-294. Russell Banks "Border Country" *Nation* November 1, 243 (1986): 460-463; Josh Rubins "Foundling Fiction" *New York Review of Books* January 15, 33 (1987): 14-15; both these reviews are quoted by Hans Bak in "Toward a Native American 'Realism' " *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction*. ed. Kristiaan Versluys. (Amsterdam: Rodopi 1992).

² Hans Bak, "Toward a Native American Realism" *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction* p.157; Alan Velie "Magical Realism And Ethnicity: The Fantastic In The Fiction Of Louise Erdrich",

in twentieth century America are both powerful and convincing. Wallace Pfcf's feeling of alienation due to his homosexuality in a "heterosexual society" is keenly felt; Sita's continual desire to maintain the youthful and "beautiful" appearance which her magazines dictate, in the end leads to her mental breakdown. Most sensitively portrayed perhaps is Russell Kashpaw who fights in World War II and the Korean war, the "white man's wars", and is decorated with more scars than medals. By these examples the structure and content of *The Beet Queen* may testify to the suitability of a realist interpretation; however, the linear time sequence and convincing characterisation of these novels can be balanced with an alternative world view.

The linear time scale can be interpreted as masking a cyclical historical trajectory. At the end of the novel, 1972, Dot Adare recognises a link to her grandmother Adelaide: "There is a thread beginning with my grandmother Adelaide and travelling through my father and arriving at me. That thread is flight." (*TBQ* 335). Dot completes the cycle of history, when, like Adelaide in 1932, she escapes from chaos and humiliation by jumping on the plane just before take-off. With respect to the characters themselves, there are occasions when their behaviour or experiences are quite ambiguous, producing very real tension, between madness and magic, and between Western and Chippewa epistemologies. When Sita sees Karl sink up to his neck in her garden it is clear she is suffering a mental breakdown and this event is interpreted in strictly psychological terms. However, when Russell calls to his sister on the four-day road of death the reader may understand this in psychological terms as an hallucination, or it can be interpreted as a genuine reference to Chippewa ritual. Similarly when Mary, as a child, hits her face on the ice *she* sees the reflection of her brother, the nuns see the face of Christ, and Celestine sees nothing but smashed ice. The epistemological ambiguity which develops, and what Rainwater terms a "frustration of narrativity"³

Women in Native American Literature and Culture. Eds. Castillo and Da Rosa. (Porto: Fernando Pessoa University Press, 1997).

³ Catherine Rainwater, "Reading Between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich" *American Literature* 62:3 (1990): 403-422, p.406.

is aggravated by the network of various narrative voices, split between first and third person. Unlike third person narrators typical of the Western realist traditions the authorial voice does not reorient the reader towards a single epistemological framework, nor reveal to the reader the fictional "truth" of the text. Instead the "authorial" voice adds to the narrative web which is never completed or closed.

Thus rather than attempting to effect closure by subscribing to Western perceptions of linear time and historical progressivism where, as Kermode argues, these values themselves are based on Christian ontology,⁴ Erdrich does more than simply deconstruct Western narrative encoding. As an alternative to fragmentation, aporia, and the erosion of collective unity, arguments often associated with the post-modern aesthetic, the patchwork of narrative voices creates a sense of collective consciousness which is typical of tribal oral literary tradition. This collective organises *itself*, resolving any need for a unifying, and ultimately artificial, omniscient narrator to organise the various narrative strands. Erdrich's "realism", which can render the personal and domestic lives of a small community in the tradition of Faulkner, while invoking the cyclical narrative structure of tribal oral "literary" forms, is a hybrid of both Western and tribal epistemologies.

As I noted earlier, however, this novel is not set on the reservation, and its concern with Chippewa cultural heritage is marginal. Castillo indicates that:

In *The Beet Queen* we encounter the Reservation more as an absence than presence, more as latency than as statement, in contrast to the arid reality of the small town of Argus, North Dakota.⁵

⁴ In *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press 1967), Kermode argues that the novel form which is a typically Western literary structure and where there is obvious and discernible beginnings and endings, is based on Christian perceptions of time. The Christian concept of time, based directly on the bible, begins with Genesis and ends in the apocalypse of Revelations. The ontological belief in time as linear and history as progressive, means time and history are eventually subject to closure. This is reflected in the narrative structure and closure of traditional "realist" novels.

⁵ Susan Perez Castillo, "Postmodernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko - Erdrich Controversy" *The Massachusetts Review* 32:2 (1991): 285-294, p.292.

Chippewa concerns which are more directly relevant in *Tracks*, *Love Medicine*, and *The Bingo Palace* are replaced in *The Beet Queen* by the concerns of white and mixed blood individuals in and around Argus. However, like the other three novels, the concern with maternal and kinship bonds is complicated and integral to the structural cohesion of the novel. Indeed the sense of community or family which is eventually established through a shared sense of commitment rather than genealogical bonds is very similar to the tribal sense of family where the nuclear family is replaced by a more inclusive and fluid family structure. It is this sense of community which threads the narrative strands together, and on which I will now elaborate.

The Beet Queen begins with the abandonment of three children, Karl, Mary and Baby Adare (later called Jude) by their mother Adelaide. Like June Morrissey, Fleur Pillager, and Pauline Puyat, Adelaide Adare severs her maternal bonds and breaks up the traditional nuclear family unit. Unlike the others Adelaide's actions are not the result of cultural alienation or cultural "homelessness". With the death of Mr. Ober (her lover and the father of her children) her homelessness is social and literal: Adelaide is an unmarried mother and has no claim on Mr Ober's legacy. When she flies off with The Great Omar - a bootlegger whose only asset is a plane held together with baling wire (*TBQ* 61) - it is a desperate attempt to escape her very real poverty. By cutting ties with her children there is no guiding or unifying parental force of any kind and ties between the children dissolve. First the baby is kidnapped, leaving Mary and Karl to find their way to Aunt Fritzie's in Argus. On the way there Mary and Karl are separated when a dog attacks them; Karl jumps back into the boxcar, and Mary runs east for Argus (*TBQ* 2). Therefore the narrative at this very early stage has the potential to disperse in at least three different directions as Karl's, Mary's and Jude's experiences of family life develop.

It would be wrong to suggest that their paths develop in complete isolation; after all this would be very difficult to reconcile with *The Beet Queen's* narrative unity, albeit unstable. There are occasions where by chance or design their paths do cross. Karl meets Jude at the orphans' picnic, in the place where they were first abandoned, and recognises him by his red hair and resemblance to his mother: "He was almost too much like her" (*TBQ* 81). Jude on the other hand recognises Karl as the Devil (*TBQ* 82). Later Karl shows up in Argus looking for Mary. Their reunion is fairly uneventful and relayed by Celestine, a third party who reports that they argued and Mary threw a can of oysters at him (*TBQ* 135). With these infrequent encounters, Erdrich engages with the difficulty of reuniting disparate family members. In structural terms this translates into a process of subtly weaving together the narrative fragments of these siblings who would otherwise be separated over time and place. With the absence of their mother, familial ties take on a different form to that of the Western tradition of the nuclear family. The baby is named Jude by his adoptive parents Catherine and Martin Miller. Mary reaches Aunt Fritzie's and is "adopted" into her family, much to her cousin Sita's dismay. Jude then grows up in a traditional nuclear family, and Mary is obsessed with becoming as much a daughter to Fritzie and Pete as Sita, establishing a similar family unit. Initially, however, I will consider Karl's experience.

Karl is the only one of the children who is not brought up in a family environment and is never able to establish meaningful family relationships in later life: not when he is reunited with Mary, not when he marries Celestine, and not when he becomes a father to Dot. It is significant that though Karl is recognised by his brother as the Devil, as I have outlined above, Mary sees his image in the smashed ice, but the nuns perceive it to be a minor miracle and a manifestation of Christ. Karl is a character of extremes, seen as the Devil and as Christ; he is Celestine's husband and Wallace Pfef's lover. It is not until Karl can reconcile these extremes that he can come to terms with his own identity and sexuality. Only then can he hope to establish emotional ties with

other people and become part of the "family" unit which develops over time in Argus. This resolution is never fulfilled, nor wholly denied, substantiating claims that the text resists closure and as such transgresses the limits of traditional realist trends.

Significantly, Karl is never able to resolve the truth of his own past: he is unable to deal with the truth of his mother's abandonment. Thus it is not Karl's moral ineptitude, nor his ambivalent sexuality which are the *causes* of his inability to establish family ties, or emotional commitments of any sort. Obviously these characteristics play a significant part, but I would argue that it is Adelaide's abandonment, and the break-up of a secure family environment, which shatters his faith in genealogical ties and mutual human commitment. The absence of mothers is not an uncommon feature in Erdrich's fiction, and the most obvious parallel to draw with Karl would be Lipsha Morrissey. Where Karl is raised in an orphanage, Lipsha fares better since Marie adopts him, establishing a difference in the perception of family between western and tribal culture. The tribal sense of family is more inclusive than the Western perception. In tribal culture "family" is a term which is not dependent on genealogical ties, but rather on a shared sense of commitment and clan structures. Karl, however, does not have recourse to tribal tradition and alternative family structures. Abandoned as a child, and brought up in a Catholic orphanage, Karl is alienated from his predominantly white, Western and Catholic world because he belongs to no existing family unit (the basis of Western social structure), and cannot reconcile his bisexuality with the normative heterosexual code.

However, it would be facile to argue that by this comparison Chippewa culture is somehow given precedence over, and is allowed to dominate, Western cultural values. Clearly Erdrich's interest lies in deconstructing Western normative codes of family and sexuality but not to the point of erasure. This comes too close to the idealisation of Chippewa and tribal culture which inevitably maintains Western / tribal binary positioning. In Erdrich's fiction those who survive are those who seek to transgress the

"normative" codes which would limit or insularise personal and cultural identities. Lipsha is a survivor not *because* of his Chippewa heritage, although it remains an important facet of his identity; rather, he too must reconcile the contradiction that his mother loved him, tried to drown him and abandoned him. Only then can he move on to a meaningful relationship with Shawnee Ray and her son Redford.⁶ Lipsha is a survivor and an integrated member of his social environment because he engages with the "truths", or stories of his past, as they are presented to him by Albertine, Zelda and Lulu. Alternatively, Karl is determined to preserve his own lie and remains to a certain extent alienated from family, friends and the experience of collective identity.

Karl's last and lasting memory of his mother remains with him when he travels with Fleur Pillager. He describes his mother's last kiss as cold (TBQ 53), and interprets this as a symptom of her fear of flying. In an ironic sense, perhaps it is, since the consequences of this flight are clear to her though this is not what he means. He also believes that Omar kidnapped her, and fantasises about rescuing her:

Once I could walk I'd hunt him down. One morning I would stand at his door. He'd appear, wiping soap from his chest, and with no warning I'd strike. I killed the pilot many times and many ways as we traveled. Always, at the end of each episode, my mother rushed over his dead body. She held me close, and when she kissed me her lips were lingering and warm. (TBQ 53)

Note Adelaide's kiss is now warm, but the only warmth he receives is from Fleur who mends his broken ankles and cures his pneumonia using the old Chippewa methods:

My fever had broken sometime during the night. She rolled me in the outermost dry blankets and put me on the reeds again. She piled more reeds on top of me. And over all that, she lay herself, a crushing weight, and at first I was cold again and felt

⁶ At present I have only sketched out Lipsha's narrative and fictional presence although he is crucial to *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*. Therefore I will consider Lipsha more explicitly, in terms of narrative structure and cultural / gender identity in Chapter Two.

my lungs tightening but then, from above, her warmth pressed down. (TBQ 51)

From Fleur, his temporary adoptive mother, Karl learns survival. Fleur is described as a wanderer who "made her living by peddling whatever came her way to sell" (TBQ 50). Karl in later life follows this path, becoming a travelling salesman, trading in anything from knives to wheelchairs. However where Fleur is forced to trade for her own survival as well as her "family's"⁷ in order to retain a microcosm of traditional Chippewa culture in an increasingly westernised world, Karl travels and trades because he has no sense of family or belonging.

In contrast to Lipsha and Fleur, Karl is alienated within a consumerist, disposable society where there is no past, and no kinship or family ties. Again this does not advocate a return to "authentic" Chippewa cultural values nor the unmediated primacy of the nuclear family. Rather, as is Lipsha's experience in *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*, reconciliation occurs when the demands of family commitment (which in Lipsha's case are manifest in tribal unity) can be linked with the demands of late twentieth century capitalist culture. That is, Lipsha must find a way to acquire the love medicine *and* the bingo winnings, so that one does not necessarily preclude the other. It may be fair to argue that in Karl's case he sees one as precluding the other as a defence against acknowledging past abandonment and experiencing further rejection.

Karl is not just abandoned by his mother, but is rejected by everyone he admits to loving, specifically Giles Saint Ambrose and Celestine James. Giles Saint Ambrose, the man with whom Karl has his first homosexual experience, clearly wants nothing more than sex (TBQ 25), and Celestine, who eventually marries him after she becomes pregnant, throws him out as she finds his presence oppressive; family life is not like the fairy-tale she imagines. Therefore Karl is a character who is literally homeless with

⁷ Note Fleur's family is Eli and later Russell, not her daughter Lulu, whose fate we discover in *Tracks*. The important point is that familial ties in a tribal context are not biological but based on common spiritual / cultural values, and a genuine sense of belonging.

no sense of belonging, as well as being emotionally and socially alienated because of his bi-sexuality. Constant travelling enables him to avoid this truth, but eventually he feels his own homelessness and alienation when he perceives his life as part of a "senseless landscape" of motels and neon lights (*TBQ* 318).

Karl is a wanderer literally, emotionally, and socially, always on the periphery of the small community in Argus. He may be Dot's father, Celestine's husband, Mary's brother, Wallace's lover, and Sita's cousin, but his effect on their lives is characterised by his absence. Indeed Wallace only takes on a paternal role with Dot because Karl is absent. Although he has the potential to link the other narratives, through blood and emotional ties, his narrative remains peripheral and to a large extent isolated from the small family unit which grows together over the fifty years in which the novel is set. It must be acknowledged that Dot briefly, but importantly, does recognise the link through her father to her grandmother as she completes the historical cycle when jumping on the plane. This is one of the most important structural features of the novel since it validates the perception of the novel and history as cyclical - typical of tribal traditions - rather than conforming to the western trend of linear progression. Moreover where the others have lived together and are growing old at the same rate, Karl seems to exist outside the effects of time.

Time in Karl's life is described as a never ending present:

During long drives my trick was usually to hit on a catchy tune or talk back to the radio, but after a while I switched it off. I found it pleasant to have the peace of the afternoon around me, to be at the center of unchanging fields of snow and brown branches. The landscape stayed so much the same, in fact, that at one point I seemed suspended, my wheels spinning in thin air. I hung motionless in speed above the earth like a fixed star. (*TBQ* 320)

Pittman, in her essay "Cross-Cultural Reading and Generic Transformations", considers the time - space continuum as it manifests

itself in the motif of the road in *Love Medicine*. Glossing Bakhtin, she comments:

The importance of the chronotope of the road lies in its convenience for meetings and encounters. Such meanings can serve important 'architectonic functions' (*DI*, 98) in the plot or can be combined with the "chronotope of the threshold as a moment of crisis" (*DI*, 248). When Bakhtin says that "[t]ime, as it were, fuses together with space and flows in it (forming the road)", he recalls the many historical forms in which a continuous road provides a ground for "all events" (*DI*, 244).⁸

Pittman goes on to consider the different cultural perspectives of the chronotope, one based in a Western linear tradition (by considering the picturesque tradition), and the other based in a tribal context via Paula Gunn Allen's discussion (see *The Sacred Hoop*) of time and space in a cyclical and dynamic continuum. In both traditions however, she describes the continuum, through the motif of the road, as an agent for movement, change and continuity. Therefore, when Karl feels himself "suspended" in "motionless speed" Erdrich ruptures the space - time continuum enabling Karl's homelessness to be figured on a much larger, and more damning, scale. By suggesting his exclusion from time and history, Erdrich substantially increases the effects of Karl's social alienation.

Thus, while Wallace is conscious of his ageing appearance when he knows Karl is returning to see Dot crowned Beet Queen, Karl somehow retains a youthful image (*TBQ* 309). But Karl wants the future which "normal" ageing would bring, one with a continuous present and a lifestyle where everything, including his past and people, are disposable and left behind (*TBQ* 319). In a moment of clarity Karl admits: "I give nothing, take nothing, mean nothing, hold nothing" (*TBQ* 318). Perhaps this is his destiny. Daniela Daniele notes that Karl is doomed to retrace

⁸ Barbara L. Pittman, "Cross-Cultural Reading and Generic Transformations: The Chronotope of the Road in Erdrich's *Love Medicine*" *American Literature*, 67:4 (1995):777-792, p.779. Pittman quotes from M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981)

his mother's pattern of loss.⁹ Like Adelaide, he is incapable of belonging to any family unit, and as such his narrative voice is itself peripheral to the stronger structural unity of Mary's, Celestine's, Wallace's, and Dot's narratives. His absence perhaps makes stronger their unity and his narrative is structurally important to a novel which is trying to reflect the lives of those on the periphery. Perhaps Karl's most promising relationship is with Wallace Pfef. On their first meeting, Wallace mentions he is from Argus and Karl, letting down his guard for a brief moment, makes reference to his sister:

He didn't have much to say about anything now, but he kept that waiting look on his face, and although I don't usually talk about myself, try to keep my distance, I added what I never told anyone.

"I've got a sister" I said. "She lives in your town."

He looked expectant. Clearly, he knew everyone in Argus, and I realised I'd gone too far....

"But I don't know who she is," I backpedaled. (*TBQ* 103)

Karl's instinctive trust in Wallace recedes at a crucial point for reasons he reveals later: "I'd enough setbacks with other people, and perhaps because of them I never let anything go far enough to cause me trouble" (*TBQ* 104). The ghosts of his mother's abandonment and Giles St. Ambrose's rejection lie behind this general emotional instinct. After his failed marriage to Celestine, and years on the road, Karl returns to Argus with the purpose of seeing Dot crowned Beet Queen but more importantly perhaps to visit Wallace. The timing of his return is quite providential. In a final "leap of faith" in emotional commitment, Karl dives into the water tank to save an unconscious and drowning Wallace:

I pushed past the crowd and fell into the tank with Wallace. I went down on my knees, waded forward to where he rested on the shallow plastic bottom, heavy as a sleeping child. It looked like he was taking a nap there. It looked like he was already drowned. When I pulled him up, streaming water, bewildered and thrashing, sick to the bone with amazement, he threw his

⁹ Daniela Daniele, "Transactions in a Native Land" *RSA Journal* 3 (1992): 43-58, p.55. Daniel also suggests that Celestine suffers a similar fate, but I would dispute this since it is not consistent with the unsentimental, enduring, and in the end reciprocated love she has for her daughter Dot.

arms out, struggled. I dragged him close, and the right words came back.

"Screw the management," I said. (*TBQ* 323)

Karl repeats to Wallace what he said during their first encounter when Karl is somersaulting on the bed. Wallace being cautious, warns him to stop because of the management (*TBQ* 106), and Karl's reaction is typically dismissive. The effect of this repetition of "Screw the management" is to situate their relationship in a circular pattern. Furthermore, the phrase itself indicates Karl's disregard for authority, but it is no longer limited to hotel management. The situation in which they now find themselves is public, most of Argus have attended the parade, and Karl's comment could easily be directed at the socially authoritative, and normative heterosexual code of the 1950's in mid-West America. Sufficiently unidealised and unsentimental, the prospect of committing to and maintaining emotional bonds is partially undercut. On the way home from the Beet Parade and the aftermath of the fiasco therein, Dot and Celestine see his car outside Wallace Pfef's house "ready for a smooth exit" (*TBQ* 338). In the end his attempts to become part of small-town life are ambivalent. In mid-twentieth century small-town America, an open homosexual relationship would be an unrealistic conclusion. The denial of this relationship is perhaps one of the more socially accurate aspects of *The Beet Queen's* realism. Karl's capacity to commit is necessarily ambivalent but ends more hopefully than it begins. This is contrary to his sister Mary's over-riding and obsessive need to feel necessary to family and community life.

Mary's experience is very different. Unlike Karl she never forgives her mother, and constructs her life around compensating for this loss. Her first act is to erase her past:

At night they appeared, Karl, Mama, my baby brother, and Mr. Ober with his mouth full of grain. They tried to reach through air and earth. They tried to tell me there was rhyme and reason. But I put my hands over my ears.

I'd lost trust in the past. They were part of a fading pattern that was beyond understanding, and brought me no comfort. (*TBQ* 21)

Dreaming of her mother, she imagines Adelaide falling through the air, and having no love or forgiveness, allows her hit to earth and die (*TBQ* 16). When correspondence from Adelaide reaches Mary, she decides to "kill off" the family by sending her a postcard with the message: "All your children starved dead." (*TBQ* 58). This has the effect of cutting all ties from her original family, so when she is reunited with Karl he accuses her of having "no family feelings", "(a)nd she answered that she had no family." (*TBQ* 318) While Karl as a child clings to an illusion of his mother's love, Mary is quick to disown her, acknowledging Aunt Fritzie in her place: "You're more a mother to me now." (*TBQ* 57) Mary survives by making it her quest to become "essential to all of them, so depended upon that they could never send me off." (*TBQ* 19)

Fritzie's and Adelaide's relationship with their daughters is interesting. It seems that in terms of temperament and character they have been given the wrong daughters - one of the many examples in the novel which favours spiritual rather than genealogical bonds in family relationships. In the traditional process of family inheritance, the business should have gone to Sita but like the "cow's diamond" Pete promised his daughter, this also goes to Mary, the "square and practical" one (*TBQ* 1). Sita, however, is desperate to escape the butcher's shop, and idolises her Aunt Adelaide's nice clothes and "style" which according to Sita neither her mother nor Mary could possibly understand:

Her mother (Mary's mother) was still alive, even if she had left my cousin, which I doubted. I really thought that Mary just ran away from her mother because she could not appreciate Adelaide's style. It's not everyone who understands how to use their good looks to the best advantage. My Aunt Adelaide did. She was always my favorite, and I just died for her to visit. But she didn't come often because my mother couldn't understand style either. (*TBQ* 28)

The irony is quite striking. Adelaide presumably did use her looks to attract Mr. Ober, and later to marry Omar. However, neither made her happy for long and in the end violent mood swings and an unbalanced mental state were her destiny. Sita suffers a similar fate. Her first husband, Jimmy, eventually divorces her, and her second husband becomes a full time carer to her nervous disposition, as Omar is to Adelaide. As a young girl Sita's main aim is to escape the confines of the butcher's shop and Argus, to become a model, and live in a "modern" apartment in Fargo. (*TBQ* 76) Sita later retrieves Adelaide's necklace from a the pawnshop (*TBQ* 96) and to balance this "maternal swap" Mary has been left to run the business which from an early stage she realises is her perfect home. (*TBQ* 67)

It is true that Sita and Mary are never close. From the outset Sita resents having to share with Mary: "First my room, then my clothing, then the cow's diamond. But the worst was yet to come when she stole Celestine."(*TBQ* 30). However this does not preclude the concept of family loyalty from this eclectic group. Later when Sita re-opens The Poopdeck as Chez Sita, Home of the Flambeed Shrimp, Celestine is well aware of the purpose of their invitation:

I read how we are cordially invited to the grand opening of Chez Sita, one week from this evening. There is a note at the bottom, in Sita's tight little handwriting, that tells us ties and suit coats are required wearing for men, and also that ladies must dress in the appropriate fashion. This is Sita's way of telling us she doesn't really want us to come, her low-class former friends and relatives. She is sending us the invitation to rub our faces in the subtle ambience of her new and very prosperous life. (*TBQ* 115)

Despite this tension, there is an unusual sense of loyalty in this "family unit", and Mary, Celestine and Russell attend the opening as formally requested. The chef and some staff contract food poisoning from the shrimp (*TBQ* 121) and due to this family commitment, Mary, Celestine and Russell save the opening night from disaster. Significantly it is Mary who takes control of the situation, and for the first and possibly the only

time, her domineering role is appreciated. Sita coolly thanks them but it is not her thanks which is important; it is rather their feeling of community which matters.

It is almost dawn before Mary, Russell, and myself (Celestine) are finally let out the door beneath the dark ship's prow. The air is cool and gray. The sky sparkles and the dew makes everything smell fresh, even the gravel in the parking lot. Russell lounges on the side of the truck for a moment, lighting a cigarette between his palms. The cupped glow reflects onto his face. Mary glows too. Her dress is spectral, floating across the flat ground. (*TBQ* 123)

A relaxed atmosphere emerges after the preceding hectic hours in the kitchen. This could be said to include Sita indirectly, despite her emotional and actual distance from the scene since Sita is the stimulus for the night's events. The other three maintain the comfortable trust and unity which they have established. Mary tosses her yarrow sticks onto the hood of the van, but the "truth" which the sticks hold is left undisclosed, as they slip off the hood when they drive away: "we laugh every time this happens, as though we're throwing caution to the winds." (*TBQ* 124). The secret of the sticks, like the secret of their particular (non-genealogical) family commitment and loyalty, is a site of irreducibility which finds its strength in its undefined and unresolvable status.

With the sense of family commitment firmly established through transgressing the limits of the genealogical family structure, it is not surprising that when Sita needs their help again, they are quick to go to her aid. It is significant that Celestine, who is half-Chippewa and has no genealogical ties to Sita, senses her need first.

I dream that Sita is standing in her front yard underneath the Mountain Ash. I see the orange berries glaring behind her, the ferny leaves tossing in the air. She is twisting her hands in a fancy hostess apron and looking out on the road. She is watching for someone.

"I call and you don't come", she mutters.....

Maybe its the brilliance of the berries in the tree, the blue and white lace of the apron, or Sita's long look of sickness.

Whatever it is, the dream is more real than life to me. (TBQ 264-5)

Celestine's reaction to this dream or vision (she acts on it as if the event was witnessed in full consciousness) harbours a faith in tribal culture and the tradition of appropriating the value of "truth" onto such visions.¹⁰ The novel resists realist trends by endowing Celestine's vision with the value of "truth". Moreover, it crystallises the kinship ties of this collective, and since Celestine is not biologically related to Sita this must be perceived in spiritual terms and easily associated with tribal epistemology. A more fluid concept of family is offered - very different from the western nuclear family structure - as well as the capacity for forgiveness. Sita is not pleasant to Celestine or Mary, but they are constant and stay until the end and beyond. Unable to leave Sita's dead body alone in Blue Mound, they take her to the Beet Parade. Leaving her in the van as they go to see Dot crowned, they "waited there a moment longer hesitating as if to make sure" (TBQ 297).

Although their commitment to Sita is commendable, for Mary the need-to-be-needed is an obsession she never outgrows. Her need to become necessary to the Kozka family when she is a child is understandable. But, in later life this develops into a bad dose of overcompensation when she tries to usurp Celestine's role as mother to Dot. Anxious to compensate for her own lack of family, she thrives on building a relationship with her niece Wallacette. Immediately after the birth and naming of Wallacette, Mary renames her Dot in an effort to assert her importance on the child's upbringing. Her attempts to be Dot's "spiritual" mother begin when Celestine first becomes pregnant:

¹⁰ This is not an unusual feature of Erdrich's fiction but is uncommon in *The Beet Queen*, which, in some ways as my argument is outlining, substantiates some of the trends of "realist" fiction. However, I will discuss the importance of visions and dreams in a tribal context with reference to *Tracks*, *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*. The main source of reference for my understanding of tribal tradition is A. Irving Hallowell's "Ojibwa World View" included in *The North American Indians*. Eds. Owen, Deetz, Fisher. (New York: The Macmillan Company 1967), and I will make substantial use of this text in later chapters.

It seemed, in her (Mary's) trance that a great deal of time went by... The season waned and Celestine's baby grew large as day. It was a girl, much larger than Mary's lost baby brother, but just as vigorous, and with a headful of blazing dark red curls. She peered at Mary, her eyes the gray-blue of newborns, unfocused but willful already, and a stubborn intensity that Mary recognised as her own. (*TBQ* 143)

Mary's vision turns out to be accurate, and one wonders where the visionary and mystical fit into a narrative which is described as "ostensibly realist" (Bak). With reference to this vision, her glowing blue hands (*TBQ* 77), and when she smashes her face on the ice to reveal the image of her brother or Christ, Erdrich frustrates traditional narrative closure by insisting on an unresolvable tension between the mystical and the "real".

Mary and Karl construct new family relationships based on the effects of their mother's abandonment. Mary overcompensates, making herself essential to Fritzie, and later by trying to monopolise Dot. Due to past rejection Karl is unable to form any kind of committed relationship and finds it impossible to become part of family life. Their brother Jude on the other hand has a typically Western nuclear-family upbringing, and while growing up experiences none of their insecurities. Jude's story, the story of his kidnapping, is told in the section called "Rescue". He is saved from an unknown fate with Mary and Karl and is fed, loved and raised by Catherine and Martin Miller, but the roles are reversed when it becomes clear that it was Jude who "rescued" Catherine. After the death of her newly born baby, she is desperate to fill the void caused by this loss, and needs a child as much as Jude needs a mother.

Catherine's experience is much like Mary's with respect to Dot. With these two women, Erdrich engages with mothering as an act of replacement and compensation for loss. The need-to-be-needed is again referred to within a family context and although Catherine's story is given less focus than Mary's, it does provide an interesting parallel. Without straying into a Freudian analysis, Catherine's and Mary's desire

to "mother" is problematic. Obviously the loss Catherine endured and the rejection Mary experienced are unusual circumstances, but their need to mother could be interpreted as Erdrich's slippage into biologism; after all, their need to mother does seem to determine their existence. However, I cannot agree with this conclusion due to the efforts Erdrich makes to ensure that gender(ed) identity is not controlled by biological limits. Gender identity in Erdrich's texts is more often constructed by explicit transgression of the normative codes which determine the needs and / or desires of the "socially integrated" Woman and Man. Perhaps one should note Wallace Pfef's pleasure in being Dot's father-figure and the anxiety he experiences concerning this parental role with Karl's pending arrival.¹¹ A more appropriate conclusion may be reached if motherhood is viewed as more than simply rearing and feeding children. In Native American culture motherhood does not simply refer to a domestic role; Meldan Tanrisal goes so far as to argue that: "In Indian tradition, mothering and Indianness go together. Thus, being an Indian is equal to being a mother".¹² That is, motherhood is a concept perceived not just as a domestic role for women, but contextualised within a tribal world view it becomes the focus for the continuation for tribal traditions and culture. This option may not be open to Mary, and certainly not to Catherine, but it does engage with the necessity to re-negotiate the limits of motherhood with a western context. Only by re-negotiating the terms of motherhood can Catherine's decision to keep "the strange little green plaid gown the baby had been wearing on the night he came to her rescue." (*TBQ* 47) avoid association with biologism.

Jude's adoption does not become problematic in the text, as the end seems to justify the means. In later years when Jude learns the truth, the sense of belonging to his family (the Millers) along with his Catholic faith in traditional genealogical family ties is considerably shaken. Jude

¹¹ In *Tracks* Nanapush quite explicitly takes on a maternal role when he perceives himself to be like a woman when reviving Lulu from near death - this I will consider in more depth in Chapter Three. Most recently however, in *The Antelope Wife*, Erdrich goes so far as to have a male character breast-feed a baby, transgressing biological rather than simply gender boundaries on this occasion.

¹² Meldan Tanrisal, "Mother and Child Relationships in the Novels of Louise Erdrich" *American Studies International* 35:3 (1997): 67-79, p.73.

always considers his mother to be Catherine and feels separation and emotional homelessness when he learns the truth:

He closed his eyes and tried to think of his mother. Catherine Miller's long broad serious face was turned away from him...He tried to keep his mind in check, but still the thought came. All that held him together now was the crowd, and when the parade was finally over and they drew apart he would disperse, too, in so many pieces that not even the work of his own hands could shape him back the way he was. (*TBQ* 314-5)

Jude's reaction is figured in quasi-physical and psychological terms. The image of the crowd holding him together physically is neatly tied to his potential towards emotional disintegration. Jude finally experiences the vulnerability which Mary and Karl experienced as children when they watched their mother fly out of their lives. Jude's sense of identity is thrown into disarray when, in effect, he loses two mothers and his faith in the traditional family unit. Erdrich is slightly ambivalent about her attitude towards the nuclear family. Although Jude is brought up in a stable and loving family environment, and gets a better deal than his brother Karl, his security and identity are based on illusion rather than truth. The contingent nature of truth becomes all too apparent:

He (Jude) was here (in Argus) to find out the truth behind the letter that his mother had put into his hand two days before. At first he had not even been curious. He was reliable, a man of good sense, a satisfied priest admired for his tactful sermons and his warmth with the elderly. His first reaction to the letter had been annoyance, worry for his mother. But she was very weak now and not overly concerned about anything besides her illness. (*TBQ* 312-3)

Severed now from the stability this illusion supplied, the effect is devastating. Everything he depends upon for stability and a coherent world view - his mother, his family and the very nature of truth - gradually slip away. Like Karl he becomes very uncertain about what his future holds and his sense of self, personal history and trust in objective reality are becoming increasingly fragile. Erdrich leaves Jude in this slightly disoriented state. Whether or not he can successfully re-establish

links with his original family members is left unsaid. As Jude's perception of the family unit is left fragmented, his narrative is left open-ended.

A successful family reunion is made impossible by the death of Mr. Ober, Karl and Mary's lack of reciprocal affection, and Mary's inability to forgive her mother for leaving. The structure of the novel which is characterised by first person narrators, and a curious third person narrator, which falls some way short of omniscience, reflects the breakdown of the traditional unified family unit. Narrative closure is made impossible due to the absence of a reorienting and authorial third person narrator who is unwilling to verify or deny some of the strange happenings in *Argus* - Mary's blue hands and Russell's walk on the road of death, to name only two. However, the text is not just a collection of scattered elements. Up until now my argument has largely focused on the disintegration of the nuclear family which has a definite impact on Western value systems and literary trends. Contrary to this, a significant amount of the novel focuses on re-establishing a sense of community in the wake of disintegration, much like the reorganisation of tribal societies in the wake of cultural alienation. The thread of continuity manifests itself in the unusual and sometimes unlikely ties which develop between the characters, as they create a different sense of family to the Western genealogical model which has failed all of them. Their sense of "family" is more closely aligned to a tribal collective where the limits of "family" are more fluid, characterised by diversity and the common occurrence of unofficial adoption.

While the older characters, Karl, Mary, Celestine, and Sita experience strained or non-existent family relationships, Dot from the moment she is born is smothered by affection from her mother Celestine, from Mary, and from her replacement father Wallace. All these characters express the need to be parents, the need to belong to a family unit - very much like Catherine Miller. Dot quickly learns to exploit them and when she

reaches adolescence Wallace considers the effect she has had on those who love her:

More than anything we had in common, Dot's spite drove Celestine, Mary, and me together. Dot had not been an easy child, but before this we'd been able to out-talk her. Now she could out-talked us, listed each fault, left us stricken. She ate our hearts to the bone, devoured us, grew robust on our grief and our bewilderment. More than anything, we were shocked by what we had created. (*TBQ* 301)

The influence parents (biological or adoptive) have on children, according to Wallace's analysis, is immense, and the unconditional force of parental love in this extended family unit is unrelenting. Wallace becomes a member of this unit when he helps Celestine deliver Dot, and cuts the umbilical cord. With Karl's pending arrival and the threat of him assuming the paternal role, Wallace reminisces about her birth:

"Sometimes I sat on her (Dot's) couch, the one she was born on, and time collapsed. I saw reels of home movies in my head." (*TBQ* 306). Although he is the only character not biologically connected to her, he is probably the most perceptive on the reality of parenting:

(A)s time passed I learned the lessons parents do early on. You fail sometimes. No matter how much you love your children, there are always times you slip. There are moments you stutter, can't give, lose your temper or simply lose face with the world, and you can't explain this to a child. (*TBQ* 236)

When Wallace rigs the vote so that Dot will be the Beet Queen, he proves his fallibility. His good intentions have humiliating consequences when Dot discovers the truth.

Mary on the other hand is determined to usurp Celestine's parental authority. As I discussed previously Mary tries to claim Dot back from Wallace and Celestine by renaming her. She also imagines a spiritual connection with Dot: "Dot was as impatient with babyhood as I. She tries at once to grow out of it" (*TBQ* 18) and Mary is convinced that she resembles her more than Celestine. In some ways Mary is correct

although Dot quickly learns to outwit even Mary. She cannot compete with Dot's deviousness after the "naughty box" incident (*TBQ* 185). When the shop burns down Mary moves in with Celestine, sharing Dot's room, and to Celestine this is a constant irritation:

She wants to stay with me and weasel her way into Dot's affection, not that I don't understand: Mary is alone, I know. It's her way of doing it that I object to. Wallace Pfef, for instance, likes my daughter very much, but he never butts into our business the way Mary does. (*TBQ* 219)

By all accounts Dot does not lack interest from her 'parents', and the sense of family her presence inspires is as important for her development as it is for the collective / family identity of this group of individuals, who are themselves in some way isolated or alienated from society and / or their own family. However it is her relationship with her mother which is the most vital. Indeed, it would be fair to argue that theirs is the most enduring and positive mother-child relationship in the novel:

No matter how thorough Celestine's exhaustion, no matter how little sleep she'd had, there was a nerve of excitement running through each hour. Common objects and events seemed slightly strange, as if she were encountering them in the clarity of a strong dream. It was Dot's presence, her heavy sweetness, the milk of Celestine's own body on her breath, the soft odor of her hair, her glorious wealth of pink and lavender skin, that changed the cast of Celestine's daily world. (*TBQ* 175)

Even through Dot's most unruly phases, Celestine takes her parental responsibilities seriously, even if she lacks the benefit of knowing the best discipline for her child:

The nuns don't know what to do with Dot, and I don't either. So I do the wrong thing and give her everything until there is nothing left. I try to be the mother I never had to the daughter I never was. (*TBQ* 215)

Despite trials in-between, at the end of the novel the maternal bond remains intact. After realising that Wallace has rigged the vote, Dot takes off in the aeroplane acknowledging her paternal grandmother and her

dramatic flight (*TBQ* 335). But Dot returns and by the time she does the grandstand has cleared. Only her mother waits: "I can't stop seeing her....In her eyes I see the force of her love...I walk to her, drawn by her, unable to help myself." (*TBQ* 337). Thus it is not *because* of Celestine and Dot's genealogical ties that their relationship is the most positive example of mother-child bonds in the novel. Their relationship is not "natural" in the sense that it develops easily. Rather their relationship develops because of Celestine's willingness to endure the trials Dot sets for her, and in the end Dot realises the force of her mother's love and reciprocates. Like the spider's web made in Dot's hair when Celestine breast-fed her all those years ago, their relationship has been fragile and vulnerable but with the potential to mend, reform and continue.¹³

Thus by transgressing the limits of the basic nuclear family unit fundamental to Western cultural value systems; by transgressing the codes of "realism" with the inclusion of various unexplained phenomena; and by structuring this within a multivocal narrative framework where no single voice / cultural perspective dominates, *The Beet Queen* resists the terms of closure on which traditional "family saga" realist fiction depends. In line with the terms of metafiction which Waugh describes, Erdrich composes a reality or "realism" which "is continually being reappraised and resynthesised. It is no longer experienced as an order and fixed hierarchy, but a web of inter-relating, multiple hierarchies."¹⁴ Erdrich's work fits into the category of metafiction since it is "concerned as much with exploring the process of story telling as with the story

¹³ Dot reappears in *Tales of Burning Love*, and the trials of motherhood continue for Celestine. As Dot prepares to tell her mother that she has married Jack Mauser - although she has not yet divorced her first husband - she recognises her roots in Argus despite its barren appearances: "Every place that I could name you, in the whole world around us, has better things about it than Argus. I just happened to grow up here and the soil got to be part of me, the air has something in it that I breathed. Argus water, pumped from deep aquifer, always tasted stale, of ancient minerals. Add to that now leaching fertilizer. Still, the first thing I do, walking back into my mother's house, is stand at the kitchen sink and toss down glass after glass." (*Tales* 16). Dot's sense of belonging is in no small part due to her mother and the rest of her extended family.

¹⁴ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. (1984, London and New York: Routledge 1993), p.59.

itself."¹⁵ More specifically, *The Beet Queen* fits with Patricia Waugh's definition of radical metafiction where the reader is denied:

(A)ccess to a centre of orientation such as a narrator or point of view, or a stable tension between "fiction", "dream", "reality", "vision", "hallucination", "truth", "lies" etc. Naturalised or totalising interpretation becomes impossible. The logic of the everyday world is replaced by forms of contradiction and discontinuity, radical shifts of context which suggest that "reality" as well as "fiction" is merely one more game with words.¹⁶

It must be acknowledged that this generic positioning is perhaps more explicit in her other novels which Velie quite rightly argues are more inclined towards "magical realism". The other texts I will consider in due course, but with reference to *The Beet Queen*, as much as Erdrich does deny an authorial point of view, totalising interpretation and radically shifts context without warning, it would be wrong to suggest that her novels are simply "a game with words". After all, a hermeneutic analysis uncovers themes of the Depression, of regional identity, of a social climate which refuses to accept homosexuality, and a hidden cyclical narrative structure which is most appropriately understood in a tribal epistemological context. Essentially, therefore, my argument counters Silko's accusation that *The Beet Queen* is simply "auto-referential" and the worst kind of apolitical postmodernism. *The Beet Queen* interpreted in a Western context alone, which Silko advocates in an indirect way (admittedly it is susceptible to this because of its cultural setting in the mainly "white" town of Argus), is largely a misinterpretation. Any reading which refuses to transgress the boundaries of Western interpretation ignores the very convincing development of spiritual family ties which exist outside the nuclear family unit. Ultimately it ignores the possibility that there is more than one cultural paradigm, more than one framework through which the world is perceived, and finally that there is more than one narrative "truth".

¹⁵ Meldan Tarrisal, "Mother and Child Relationships in the Novels of Louise Erdrich" *American Studies International* October 35:3 (1997): 67-79, p.69.

¹⁶ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, p.136.

In the following chapter I will continue to consider the interpretation of truth and reality with reference to *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*.

Chapter 2

Resisting Death and Other Epiphanic Moments: Mothers, Children, Time and Narrativity in *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*.

In *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace* there are deaths, resisted deaths, suicide, spiritual returns, and visions which constitute epiphanies in terms of the revelation of truth or knowledge rather than a manifestation of Christian ideology. The reasons for and consequences of these (resisted) deaths, returns and visions are various and can be interpreted in a Western psychologically 'real' context where death is final. They can also be explained in the context of Chippewa spirituality where the distinction between the physical and spiritual world is more fluid. In the Western realist literary tradition death denotes the end of a character's physical presence; thereafter, their presence can only be perpetuated in the form of memory or flashback. Any spiritual or "ghostly" presence indicates a crossover into supernatural fiction, or even magic realism. However, this generic organisation relies on a Western epistemology, where life and time have discernible beginnings and ends, and where the Christian afterlife exists in exclusion of the earthly domain. Essentially, therefore, the Western understanding of life and death follows a teleological process and the ultimate epiphanic moment arrives at the end of this historical progression as the individual traverses the brink between the fixed time and place of physical existence and becomes part of the eternal spiritual dimension. Vine Deloria Jr. outlines the differences between the Christian and tribal perception of religion, time and history:

From the very beginning of the religion it has been the Christian contention that the experiences of mankind could be recorded in a linear fashion, and when this was done the whole purpose of the creation event became clear, explaining not only the history of man but revealing the nature of the end of the world and the existence of a further world to which the faithful would be welcome. Again we have a familiar distinction. Time

is regarded as all important by Christians, and it has a causal importance if any, among the tribal peoples.¹

In Erdrich's fiction, and in Chippewa epistemology, time and life are not perceived as a linear process; therefore death is just as likely to be part of the beginning as of the end.

Love Medicine begins with the death of June Morrissey and it can be argued that to some extent in this text, and in *The Bingo Palace*, she exists in a Western temporal setting as I have outlined above. In Chapter One of *Love Medicine*, to a large extent, June's presence manifests itself in the memories of her adoptive family: Marie and Zelda Kashpaw (mother and sister), and Albertine Johnson (her niece by Zelda). Significantly, Marie recalls June's attempt as a child to enact her own suicide by hanging, which itself accentuates the interpretative ambiguity of her actual death. The question of her motives is unclear: on both occasions did she actually mean to die? The suggestion on both occasions is that she did: she resents Marie for bringing her down from the hanging rope, and when she begins to walk home to the reservation the implication is that she is aware of the impending snow storm. Like the transgressive heroine in the Western tradition, perhaps, particularly in the nineteenth century, June dies because of her inability to live in an environment which cannot support her fragmented identity; an environment which cannot reconcile what she is and what it wants her to be. Alienated from her home (the reservation), and alone in the "white" town in which she lives, she is isolated and can no longer engage in mothering (which has significant status in tribal societies) nor participate in the collective tribal identity which constitutes tribal continuity. In death June is spiritually reborn: "the pure and naked part of her went on" (*LM* 7). With this reference to tribal spirituality, in one sense, June

¹ Vine Deloria Jr., *God Is Red*. (New York: Dell, 1973) p.111. Deloria goes on to argue: "Christian religion and the Western idea of history are inseparable and mutually self-supporting. To retrench the traditional concept of Western history at this point would mean to invalidate the justification for conquering the Western Hemisphere" (p.127). Erdrich's fiction, particularly *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*, engages with the problems of this (post) colonial dilemma, in terms of narrativity and temporal sequencing, as I will go on to discuss.

'resists' death and a finite Western temporal encoding is replaced by a tribal perspective which is characterised by its continuity. June re-enters Chippewa spirituality, and in her death she finally comes home: home to the family and culture to which she was alienated in life, and whose memories bring her life back into focus in Chapter One of the novel. Her spiritual resurrection in the Easter snow will change the life of her son Lipsha and has significant influence on the cultural and structural coherence of *Love Medicine*, and *The Bingo Palace*.² With June's physical survival and return home denied, a more lasting spiritual, even mythical, survival is ensured, but this can only be realised in the context of a Chippewa (tribal) interpretative methodology. As I will go on to argue, this carefully coded hermeneutic analysis is crucial to the understanding of Erdrich's work.

In the course of the novel June's presence becomes more problematic as it transgresses the bounds of realism. Further, she is metaphorically represented in the blue Firebird her son King buys with her insurance money; and she is also recalled in the form of the deer when Gordie Kashpaw believes he has killed her rather than the animal in the back of his car.³ Again, there is some narrative ambiguity. If interpreted in a Western psychological framework Gordie is simply hallucinating June's ghostly presence; alternatively, in an Ojibwa (Chippewa) world view, the deer plausibly becomes a manifestation of June's spirit. Vescey states:

The essential quality between humans and animals made the common metamorphosis between human and animal life sensible.(....) The souls of humans and animals were continuity, the essential, lasting parts of the person which could transcend the body.⁴

² June is spiritually resurrected in the Easter snow which obviously has Christian references, and again, complicates the cultural mediation within the text.

³ Further links between June and the deer are made more implicitly: June is repeatedly described as "long-legged", and moves gracefully, but it is not until *Tales of Burning Love* that the word "deerlike" (p.10) is actually used. On this occasion ("Crown of Thorns") Gordie is drunk and believes, after saying June's name, that her ghost is haunting him. He knocks down the deer when driving away from his house in an attempt to escape her presence, and later, when he has killed the deer with a crowbar, he believes he has killed June (LM 221).

⁴ Christopher Vescey, *Traditional Ojibwa Religion and Its Historical Changes*. (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1983) p.63.

If metamorphosis is acceptable in this interpretative framework, then the significance of the deer, which Vescey goes on to describe as possessing special powers over other animals and the survival of the tribe, centres June's presence and identity in a tribal continuum, creating an unresolved tension between Western and tribal interpretative frameworks.

In *The Bingo Palace*, June's presence is more tangible, but no less problematic. The use of flashback and analepsis in *The Bingo Palace* is problematic if considered as part of a Western narrative device. Unlike *Love Medicine*, the chapters of *The Bingo Palace* are not firmly dated⁵; therefore when June's childhood is revealed, the temporal positioning is not absolutely clear. The abuse she endured as a child from her mother and her mother's lover is rendered with great clarity, and the importance of this chapter is twofold: firstly it reveals June's past, and explains her inability to establish close familial bonds; and secondly, it resists narrative and temporal linearity, as the trauma and its effects on June transcend time specification.

There was a way a man could get into her body and she never knew. Pain rang everywhere. June tried to climb out of it, but his chin held her shoulder. She tried to roll from underneath, but he was on every side. Skeins of sparks buzzed down, covered her eyes and face. Then she was so small she was just a burning dot, a flung star moving, with no letup until she finally escaped into a part of her mind, where she made one promise before she went out.

Nobody ever hold me again. (TBP 60)

The rape is such a fundamental and overwhelming moment of her life that to limit it in terms of time and as part of a character's linear development is inconceivable. In a sense it exists outside of time, as part of the past and in the continuing present. Her death frees her from the pain and the indirect consequences of this pain, which include her inability to mother

⁵ The dates in *Love Medicine* are given 1981 or 1934 and so on, but although *The Bingo Palace* is a sequel to *Love Medicine*, there is no definite time specification and so the past and the present, in the form of flashback, is not so concretely separated.

her children, to be mothered by Marie, to be a wife to Gordic, and to be part of the Kashpaw family and the tribe's collective identity. Her "rebirth" allows her to re-establish some of these broken bonds, especially her relationship with her son and identification with this Chippewa band. With the exception of this rather unusual use of flashback, her presence in *The Bingo Palace* is essentially spiritual. In comparison with *Love Medicine*, her "ghostly" presence is far more tangible as she interacts with the physical world by giving her son Lipsha the winning bingo tickets. Purdy notes:

The epistemological significance of this event for Erdrich's character is telling: there is a future beyond this life, and it can have a direct effect upon the present, if one knows how to engage it. For her readers, the certainty of scientific explanations is potentially compromised; this is not Realism.⁶

The effect on Lipsha is immense, and June's spiritual return allows for the development of a mother-son relationship which until then had been denied and can only be established through the understanding and acceptance of the fluidity between the tribal spiritual world and the physical world. As Purdy correctly concludes, this is not Realism, but the generic alternative, such as magic realism, is difficult to establish since narrative interpretative strategies have to be very carefully negotiated. As I have already argued in my Introduction 'magic realism' harbours the potential to be culturally divisive when the Western, or secular, encoding sustains superior access to the fictional truth. Thus, if realism demands a secular / Western encoding of truth, the division between earthly and spiritual existence in binary terms suggests June's presence must be part of the 'magical' aspect. Problems soon manifest themselves when a tribal encoding of truth is endorsed and the relationship between the spiritual and earthly become dynamic rather than separate. Allen argues:

⁶ John Purdy, "Betting On The Future: Gambling Against Colonialism in the Novels of Louise Erdrich" *Women in Native American Literature and Culture*. Eds. Castillo and Rosa (Porto: Fernando Pessoa University Press, 1997) p.46.

Christians believe that God is separate from humanity and does as he wishes without the creative assistance of his creatures, while the non-Christian tribal person assumes a place in creation that is dynamic, creative, and responsive.⁷

Indeed, in this fictional world, and with particular emphasis on June, Erdrich crosses the cultural boundaries between the real and the unreal and between realism and magic, so that the 'magical' becomes the dominant and accepted reality, thus frustrating and effacing this generic classification.⁸ As Erdrich indicates with respect to *Tracks*, but is equally appropriate in this case: "There is no quantifiable reality. Points of view change the reality of the situation and there is reality to madness, imagined events, and perhaps something beyond that."⁹

June's resistance to death is mirrored in Fleur Pillager's "departure". As June's death in the opening of *Love Medicine* frustrates the norms of temporal linearity and teleological progression in terms of the individual, history, and religion, so Fleur's "death", which acts as the closing chapter of *The Bingo Palace* and the closing chapter of the tetralogy, effaces the norms of closure on both counts:

The island in the centre of the lake was another core of darkness toward which Fleur travelled, dragging her toboggan of bones.....As she walked over the frozen waves she felt the lake bottom buckle far below her feet. The water trembled in its sleep. She waited to catch her halting breath and felt the years slide through her arms as she braced herself, dizzy, almost weeping to see how far it was that she still had to travel.... In later days, there would be some who claimed they found her tracks and followed them to see where they changed, the pad broadened, the claw passed into the snow.....She only coughs,

⁷ Debra C. Holt quotes from Allen's *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Tradition*. (Boston: Beacon, 1986), in her own essay "Transformation and Continuance: Native American Tradition in the Novels of Louise Erdrich" *Entering the 90's: The North American Experience*. Ed Thomas E. Schirer (Proceedings from the Native American Studies Conference at Lake Superior State University, October 27-28, 1989: Lake Superior State University Press, 1991), p.150.

⁸ Elaine Tuttle Hansen briefly alludes to this difficulty: "In Erdrich's fourth novel (*The Bingo Palace*), however, we see both the central 'encounter' with a ghost and this blurring of natural and supernatural experience of text and characters." *Mother Without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) p.266.

⁹ Allan Chavkin and Nancy Chavkin (Eds.), *Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris*. (1994, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997) p.224.

low, to make her presence known. You have heard the bear laugh - that is the chuffing noise we hear and it is unmistakable. (TBP 272-4)

Fleur's burial of bones therefore encapsulates the metamorphic change of human to animal form through spiritual displacement, perhaps more concretely than June's association with the deer. Further, when Fleur crosses the water, there is an implicit resonance of Misshepesu's presence¹⁰; this recalls their complicated relationship which is explored in *Tracks*, and is something I will consider in the next chapter. The openendedness of this conclusion and the perpetuation of the carefully veiled myths and mysteries surrounding Fleur Pillager resist cultural hegemony in terms of the narrative's interpretative framework. It must be accepted that the final chapter is voiced by the quasi-authoritative third person narrator, who is sympathetic to the Chippewa world view but whose knowledge is limited. Thus Erdrich defies the limits of narrative closure by ensuring interpretative ambivalence, which concurs with the ability, and even the necessity, as I shall argue, of resisting death.

In the context which I have outlined, truth and the epiphanic moment as the revelation of truth becomes problematic particularly when visions and vision quests have such importance for Chippewa belief systems, and as such Erdrich's fiction.

The vision quest of many tribes indicates that a major responsibility of the individual is to remain open and keenly aware that he might be chosen to be the Great Mystery as a holy man, or as a great heroic warrior, as one cursed with a handicap, or as any number of other functions.¹¹

Deloria's analysis of the vision quest obviously demands the revelation of truth, thus involving a perception of truth common to most religions. There are several examples in *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*

¹⁰ Misshepesu has a dual role in Erdrich's fiction: he is both guardian and monster. In *Tracks*, which I will consider in the next chapter, his presence is particularly effective with respect to narrative interpretation, cultural continuation, and family ties.

¹¹ Vinc Deloria, *God Is Red*. (New York: Dell, 1973) p.203.

which I will refer to in due course, but the initial concern is the difficulty in representing truth through visions or epiphanies (moments of revelation) in a narrative framework which continues to resist a single perspective analysis. Clearly, in this context truth cannot be a stable entity and certainly not as clear as Deloria describes. Erdrich's work demands something more complicated than a simple exercise in hermeneutics.¹² However, it would be misguided to conclude that Erdrich positions truth on a post-modern or post-structuralist plain. Derrida insists: "Writing is read, it is not the site 'in the last instance' of hermeneutic deciphering, the decoding of meaning."¹³ This philosophy implies that truth is simply interpretation and as such eternally regressive, but for all Erdrich's fascination with veiling truth in order to avoid the pitfalls of essentialism, to deny the search for its value in turn denies the very powerful influence of Chippewa spirituality which has a profound effect on the content and shape of her work.

Narrative coherence and stability in such culturally hybrid fiction is difficult to secure since the epistemological variants can be neither suppressed nor reconciled. The relationship between the two cultural perspectives is difficult, particularly in attempts to decode the narratives concretely. But, as I will argue in this chapter, this narrative defiance or disruption, and its potential to destroy narrative integrity is consolidated by the representation of the various maternal figures who encompass the narratives in both texts and also act as a central core to the intersecting lives of their Chippewa and mixed blood children. This double motion is consistent with the aesthetic destabilisation inherent in the fluctuation of narrative interpretative strategies (which, as I have indicated, have important implications concerning - resisting - death, spirituality and the

¹² It has been argued, quite rightly, that Erdrich's work does require careful hermeneutic analysis (Castillo), although as Rainwater suggests, this is can never be totalising since Erdrich's work does manifest an "hermeneutical impasse" as two epistemologies exist within each text. See Castillo, "Postmodernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko-Erdrich Controversy" *The Massachusetts Review* 32:2 (1991): 285-294; and Catherine Rainwater, "Reading Between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich" *American Literature* 62:3 (1993): 405-422.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context" *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press 1988) p.21

vision as the revelation of truth). The relationship between Lipsha and June encompasses *Love Medicine*, while Lulu and Marie act as axes around which others rotate. In *The Bingo Palace*, Lulu and Fleur's relationship encompasses the narratives, while Zelda attempts to assume Marie's domestic centrality and June establishes a rather unusual maternal and cultural role.

Love Medicine's encompassing narrative is particularly important in establishing narrative stability. Catherine Rainwater, by outlining traditional generic trends of the Western novel, indicates significant transgression which problematises generic categorisation:

Love Medicine defies the reader's efforts to locate a conventional plot - a temporal sequence of characters' actions traceable along a "constant curve" with a teleological aim (the notion of plot consisting of beginning, conflict, rising action, resolution, ending).¹⁴

The multivocal nature of the text and its non-linear narrative trajectory together lead to this conclusion. The multiplicity of narrators characterises the diversity of tribal culture, and the narrative voices include the two "matriarchs" Lulu Lamartine and Marie Kashpaw, Nector Kashpaw, and the voices of their various children: Zelda, Gordie, and Albertine from Marie's line, and Lyman and Lipsha from Lulu's line. The narrative is framed around a circular trajectory slipping from 1981 to 1934, then completes the circle back to 1981 through to 1984. In comparison with the linear structure typical of the Western realist

¹⁴ Catherine Rainwater "Reading between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich" *American Literature* 62:3 (1990): 405-422: p.415. Velie extends this argument by suggesting "*Love Medicine* falls somewhere between being a collection of discrete stories about a group of characters related by blood and history, and a novel with a clear beginning, middle and end. Each chapter / story has its own climax, and can stand alone, but slowly an overall structure emerges in which June's son Lipsha Morrissey gains importance and finally becomes a character whose adventures give the work its shape." (Alan Velie, "Magical Realism and Ethnicity" *Women in Native American Literature and Culture*. Eds. Castillo and Rosa. (Porto: Fernando Pessoa University Press, 1997), p.62.) I would agree with the initial argument but I am not convinced that Lipsha alone shapes the structural unity of the text. As in *The Bingo Palace*, I think this is a shared responsibility.

tradition which anchors itself in a single perspective (be that first or third person), and psychological development of the main protagonist, *Love Medicine* is of a very different order. However, the same arguments do not seem to be levelled at *The Bingo Palace*, and yet, as I will argue in the course of this chapter, the two narrative structures are not so different. The superficially linear development of the narrative, and the psychological depth of Lipsha Morrissey, who must be considered the main protagonist of *The Bingo Palace* (supported by the fact that he is the only character with a distinct narrative voice) would seem to be reminiscent of realist trends. However, this surface patterning masks a more fundamental circular structure which is made so explicit in the narrative structure of *Love Medicine*. Firstly, the personal development of Lipsha must be considered in spiritual terms as well as psychological terms. It is not until the end of *Love Medicine* that he discovers the identity of his parents and without knowledge of his genealogical origins, he has difficulty in successfully "connecting" with his cultural / spiritual lineage. Once these links have been established, however, Lipsha's spiritual journey draws him back to the old Chippewa traditions embodied in his great-grandmother Fleur Pillager (*The Bingo Palace*). Thus, Lipsha's personal development is not a linear process; rather it promulgates the notion that time and experience exist in a cyclical temporal pattern.

In part, *The Bingo Palace* traces the development of a maturing and more culturally aware Lipsha, but the narrative also incorporates a collection of fragments from the past and present: from June's childhood, from Albertine's childhood, to Shawnee's new home on campus. The easy and "natural" fluctuation in temporal context belies the perception of time as linear. Moreover, by positioning the past and the present in such close proximity (in terms of textual reference and character / plot development) their interdependence becomes quite explicit, frustrating the Western tradition of historical progressivism. By this rationale, time itself is less certainly a linear process as *Love Medicine* overtly emphasises.

The structure of *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace* perhaps become more easily accessible when considering the tradition of Native American oral narratives. Allen notes: "Traditional American Indian stories work dynamically among clusters of loosely connected circles. The focus of the action shifts from one character to another as the story unfolds."¹⁵ Additionally, she argues that the "sacred hoop", where every element of the world is part of a *lifecycle*, is fundamental to American Indian spiritual and physical life.¹⁶ Therefore, the very inclusive nature of *Love Medicine*, and the rather complex temporal pattern in *The Bingo Palace* can be accounted for. It becomes logical in a tribal rather than a Western context and is thematically structured by fluid and resilient mother-child relationships which encompass and centre the narrative strands. Wong observes:

In Erdrich's novels, women, and mothers in particular, feel the tremendous responsibility of family / clan relationships which, although often troubled, sustained both individual and community.¹⁷

The relationship between June and Lipsha is one such "troubled" family relationship. As I discussed with reference to Chapter One of *Love Medicine*, June lives on in the memories of the Kashpaws when three generations gather in Zelda's home remembering her life. Lipsha is unaware that June is his mother, despite Albertine's attempts to reveal to him the secret of his birth. Lipsha has no forgiveness for the mother he believes tried to drown him: " '....even if she came back right now, this minute, and got down on her knees and said, 'Son, I am sorry for what I done to you', I would not relent on her.' " (*LM* 39). Albertine draws back from the subject, realising what Lulu articulates later, in the last chapter of the novel: "I thought it was a knowledge that could make or break

¹⁵ Paula Gunn Allen, "Kochinneako in Academe", *Feminisms*, Eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. (1991 New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993)

¹⁶ Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Tradition*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986)

you.” (*LM* 337). It is a timely revelation and once Lipsha has discovered the truth of his genealogical origins (he is the son of June Morrissey and Gerry Nanapush) he can return to the reservation as he begins to appreciate his cultural legacy and responsibility. His relationship with his father is established in this final chapter, and confirmed by the irregular heartbeat of the Nanapush men. With this lineage, a lineage which confirms him as part of a “culture-hero” or trickster tradition, he re-establishes his faith in tribal culture.

Stopping on the bridge over the boundary river, Lipsha thinks of his mother:

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. (*LM* 336-7)

Getting back in the car, he decides, “A good road led on. So there was nothing to do but cross the water, and bring her home.” (*LM* 367). Taking the blue Firebird home continues the metaphor for taking June home. The outer circle of the narrative, therefore, is provisionally closed, and June’s and Lipsha’s homecoming secures the mother-child bonds which had been lacking and ensures the potential for cultural continuity. Lipsha is now mature enough to respond to his newly found mother with a level of forgiveness which he previously thought impossible. Preceding this, his love medicine has had fatal results for Neetor (when the turkey hearts choke him), and Lipsha loses the healing touch he was so proud of. However, through his thoughts of June, and their physical and spiritual returns which envelop the narrative, Lipsha’s fate begins to change. With this rather unique mother-son relationship, the narrative structure neatly

¹⁷ Hertha D. Wong, “Adoptive Mothers and Throw Away Children” *Narrating Mothers*. Eds. Daly and

invokes the desire for the survival of Native culture within a narrative mode which manages to make the transition between the linearity of Western novelistic trends and the cyclical trajectory of the Native oral narrative. Thus, 'resisting' death and ensuring spiritual continuance is a fundamental component of this cultural continuum.

In *The Bingo Palace* Lipsha's relationship with his family and culture are once again part of the cyclical trajectory which encases the novel. In this novel, the maternal influence is widened to include Lulu and Fleur, his paternal grandmother and great-grandmother respectively. The novel opens with a description of Lulu: "On most winter days, Lulu Lamartine did not stir until the sun cast a patch of warmth for her to bask in and purr." (*TBP* 1). Lipsha at this time is working on the beet plant in Fargo¹⁸, and despite the hope that the cultural survival of the tribe is safe in Lipsha's hands (as is the implication when he brings June's spiritual presence home at the end of *Love Medicine*), it is clear that the narrator has doubts and Lipsha has a longer road ahead: "(T)hat boy crossed the line back to the reservation, proud in his mother's blue Firebird car, and then he let his chances slip. For a while he looked like he'd amount to something....But then he proved us right. For nothing captured his interest. Nothing held him. Nothing sparked." (*TBP* 7-8). Lulu and Fleur have different ideas, and significantly, they have more faith.

While he is working on the beet plant in Fargo Lulu sends him a picture of his hero father: "Perhaps it was a summons home" (*TBP* 3). Whatever the reason, Lipsha returns and the tribe's expectations are great since someone is needed to take Fleur's place:

We think about the Pillager woman, Fleur, who was always half spirit anyway. A foot on death road, a quick shuffle backwards, her dance wearies us....We know she's dawdling hanging back as long as she can, waiting for another to take her place...This

Reddy. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), p.177.

¹⁸ June also lived in Fargo and the clash between white and tribal worlds destroyed her. Since Lipsha is a part of a stronger tribal family structure (and his mother has a significant role to play in this despite her death) he is less likely to be 'lost' as June was.

time she's waiting for a young one, a successor, someone to carry on her knowledge, and since we know who that person must be, our knowledge makes us pity her. We think she's wrong. We think Fleur Pillager should settle her bones in the sun with us and take a rest, instead of wasting her last words on that medicine boy.

Lipsha Morrissey. (*TBP* 6-7)

In *The Bingo Palace* Lipsha's development assures the reader that Fleur's choice is a safe one. The tradition of the vision quest and the revelation of truth therein is fundamental to Lipsha's development. His first experience is the arrival of June's ghost, where mother-child bonds are recognised and Lipsha gains material, if not spiritual, wealth from the encounter. Secondly, he decides to accompany Lyman Lamartine on a vision quest and experiences the skunk speaking to him:

This ain't real estate.

I hear a crabby, drowsy voice in my head. Now is it the skunk who says this, or is it that my mind has finally sprung a leak?
(*TBP* 200)

Significantly, the vision is not given as reality since Lipsha himself is having difficulty accepting it as real. As with some episodes in *The Beet Queen* there is some tension between the psychological or "supernatural" interpretative framework and the tribal interpretative framework. The lasting effect of the vision is to check Lipsha's material desires and encourage him to embrace his tribal values more completely. The most profound dilemma between the real and the imagined occurs in Lipsha's vision in the slough. Here, the truth matters, but again it has to be carefully decoded. On this occasion he recalls what was possibly the most crucial event of his life, when June tries to drown him in the slough, and Misshepesu, the spiritual guardian of the tribe, breathes life into him:

You heard what Zelda said to me from her bar stool. *So why weren't you drowned?* I never thought about it either, since, but a long ways into the night I realize one thing: no way I could have made it alone. I was saved. And not by Zelda, not at first,

but by something else, something that was down there with me. I don't know who or how, and then sometime into the night I look up into dark air and see the face.

Darkened and drenched, coming toward me from the other side of drowning - it presses its mouth on mine and holds me with its fins and horns and rocks me with its long shining plant arms. (TBP 217-8)

Is this a vision, or an hallucination, or a dream? Is it not the truth, as Zelda claims, that she alone dragged him from the water? The tension is never completely resolved between the psychological and spiritual interpretations. This deliberate ambiguity confounds traditions of 'realist' fiction and interpretative methodology, since the truth cannot be hermeneutically decoded.

However, the overwhelming clarity of this vision, and Lipsha's acceptance of it as 'real', is important because it focuses Lipsha's identity in a Chippewa context. More specifically, the suggestion of Misshepesu's presence consolidates his relationship with Fleur, his great grandmother; both Fleur and Lipsha have been saved from drowning by the lake monster. Thus, the vision is the implied truth since it is in keeping with the cultural and structural coherence of the novel. Lipsha's spiritual development follows a cyclical trajectory which takes him back to the beginning of his life and the truth of his resistance to death before he can take Fleur's place in this cultural continuum at the close of the novel. The epiphanic moment, as the revelation of truth in Lipsha's final vision, depends not on evidence or scientific proof, but rather the truth is "revealed" only when he allows himself to have faith and believe in the tribal traditions passed down to him through generations. Perhaps this is a coded truth, it certainly is not totalising, but neither is it a site of endless play or *differance*.

Towards the end of the novel when Gerry and Lipsha are stranded in a snow storm the car motif reappears, extending its mystical quality further. Lipsha comments: "I should have been more amazed than I am to

see that it is June's car, and that she is driving." (TBP 256). Surely there is no doubt to the fictional truth or fictional reality of this event! The terms of what is 'real' must be based on an empirical and / or epistemological framework, and since Erdrich's work is shaped around transgressing the boundaries of both frameworks (empirical and epistemological) between a Western and Chippewa context, what is true and what is real is unfixed. In this case there is no doubt or ambiguity so to insist on its "magic realist" status is problematic since this limits the realms of the real to a specific western encoding.¹⁹ The undisputed and convincing presence of a ghost in a contemporary setting refuses to be reconciled with any one interpretative framework. The sense of place (geographic and sociological) Erdrich creates is "realistic" and unambiguous, but the matter-of-fact inclusion of a ghost in this landscape transgresses the limits of a Western encoding. Like *Love Medicine's* cyclical narrative loop, *The Bingo Palace's* superficially linear narrative masks a fundamental indebtedness to tribal epistemology.

June and Gerry drive off into a snow storm; perhaps a fitting closure to June's presence as her story comes full circle. Her maternal, cultural and structural importance, which encompasses *Love Medicine*, is widened as it become part of the closure to *The Bingo Palace*.²⁰ This episode also allows Lipsha to display and recognise the "touch" which he previously thought was gone. Left with the unnamed child Gerry and Lipsha inadvertently kidnap, Lipsha wraps himself around the child:

I think about my father and my mother, about how they have already taught me about the cold so I don't have to be afraid of it. And yet, this baby doesn't know. Cold sinks in, there to stay. And people, they'll leave you, sure. There's no return to

¹⁹ Alan Velie discusses this tension between magic realism and reality as perceived by Indians in relation to Erdrich's work. His argument outlines that magic realism can be interpreted in terms of ambiguity fantastic and the real. See, "Magical Realism and Ethnicity: The Fantastic In The Fiction Of Louise Erdrich" *Women in Native American Literature and Culture*. Eds. Castillo and Rosa. (Porto: Fernando between the Pessoa University Press, 1997) p.61.

²⁰ June's presence also opens and closes *Tales of Burning Love*; this time she is not seen as a mother but as Jack Mauser's wife; they meet, marry and June dies on the same day. Their initial and only encounter opens the novel and it is his memory of June that brings him "back to life", and "home" to Eleanor, physically and emotionally.

what was and no way back....My father taught me his last lesson in those hours, in that night. He and my mother, June, have always been inside of me, dark and shining, their absence about the size of a coin, something I have touched against and slipped.....The heater snaps off, the motor dies down.....I know it will be a long night that maybe will not end. But at least I can say, as I drift, as the cold begins to take me, as I pull the baby closer to me, zipping him inside of my jacket, here is one child who was never left behind.... I am not afraid. (TBP 258-9)

Will Lipsha survive? As the snow closes over them the memory of June's death is recalled, but Lipsha is not alienated; he is now part of, even central to, his family and their living cultural existence. Like his mother he is a survivor; and, like his great-grandmother, Fleur Pillager, also a survivor, he is part of a living cultural tradition. The "pure and naked" (LM 7) part of him will not go on, rather it will stay in the physical world, the same world that will sustain the life of this child. Ultimately, his survival rests on the faith and truth that his genealogical and cultural lineage supplies.

In the final chapter of *The Bingo Palace*, Fleur is on the road of death, and her grand-mother and Nanapush are waiting to welcome her. Preceding this she is "thinking of the boy out there. Annoyed, she took his place." (TBP 272) The boy is Lipsha, and by taking his place, we know his life is assured, and Fleur, after nearly a century, can rest with her ancestors, her presence becoming wholly spiritual. Therefore, the widest narrative hoop, from *Tracks* to *The Bingo Palace*, ends as it begins with the mysteries surrounding the "eternal" life and resistance to death of Fleur Pillager. By spiritual displacement, Fleur allows Lipsha to take her life, whereas in *Tracks* we find that the more usual tactic is for Fleur to borrow from others. Thus, in this end there is beginning as Lipsha is well placed to become the focus, as Fleur before him, for the continuance of this Chippewa band; and as death is resisted so too is novelistic closure, even if the *lifecycles* are completed.

Since both texts, *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*, display such fundamental appreciation for Chippewa traditions and spirituality, *The Bingo Palace's* encompassing structure (if considered in terms of genealogical lineage), and tribal traditions (metaphysical transformation and displacement), are most meaningfully understood as a manifestation of the "sacred hoop" of life. There are limitations to a reading which considers only a linear narrative concerned with the psychological development of its main protagonist. This reading pronounces *Love Medicine* to be a book of short stories, a "non-novel". Also with reference to *The Bingo Palace*, a psychological interpretation has difficulty engaging with the visions, visits from the dead, and the non-linear temporal patterning. Indirectly it must conclude Lipsha's survival is at least unlikely, if not impossible. Lipsha's development takes place under the direction of his dead mother, and his paternal grandmother and great-grandmother, all of whom can be understood in terms related solely to tribal epistemology.²¹ Their presence marks beginnings and endings in, and of, the novels in different ways, encompassing the children and their stories in a culturally coherent and structurally stabilising yet fluid way.

The powerful maternal images of Marie Kashpaw and Lulu Lamartine manifest domestic centrality which consolidates narratorial stability in *Love Medicine*. The status and respect they command increases with age, and when they eventually join forces in their old age, their domestic power is translated into political power on a tribal scale. Their journey from domestic control to tribal politics, although it comes with age, is complicated by a narrative structure which balances a linear narrative sequence with a cyclical narrative sequence. By disrupting narratorial linearity, both Marie's and Lulu's "ageing into power",²² is not an

²¹ June is understood with reference to the deer, and spiritual presence in the car; Lulu, now considered an "old timer", has complicated genealogical origins which I will consider in a later chapter; and Fleur is the funnel of Chippewa culture, whose spiritual presence, in the end, is figured in the bear.

²² This is a phrase borrowed from Castillo's article "Women Ageing Into Power: Fictional Representations of Power and Authority In Louise Erdrich's Female Characters" *Women in Native*

example of linear progress in structural terms. Obviously, in the fictional reality of the text, Marie and Lulu develop from childhood to adulthood gathering maturity and responsibility as their lives progress. However, their lives are not narrated in this linear sequence. The extra-textual temporal sequence is easily decoded and although this is part of the reading / reception process, it is only indirectly relevant to the story told.

From the outset, Marie Kashpaw is considered to be a formidable maternal and matriarchal presence as Albertine's recollections and present experience suggest:

When I was very young, she always seemed the same size to me as the rock cairns commemorating Indian defeats around here. But every time I saw her now I realised that she wasn't so large, it was just that her figure was weathered and massive as a statue roughed out in rock. (LM 16)

Similarly, Lipsha mentions Marie's stature in comparison with Nector: "She stood in front of him, overmatching him pound for pound, and taller too, for she had a growth spurt in middle age while he had shrunk, so now length and breadth of her surpassed him." (LM 233) Marie's statuesque figure, her large physical presence, is of course matched by her strength of character. The fear, or apprehension, she instils in her own descendants is no better expressed than in her relationship with her son, Gordie:

"Zelda's in there" King shouted a warning, "and Grandma too!" Gordie sat down on the steps to collect his wits before tangling with them. (LM 27)

Later, when Gordie's alcoholism reaches its peak, Marie unrepentantly slashes his hand when he reaches for a bottle (LM 266). Indeed, she goes on to consider the potential for a more devastating scenario:

American Literature and Culture. Eds. Castillo and Rosa. (Porto: Fernando Pessoa University Press, 1997) p.29-36. It is coined from Lipsha's words at the beginning of *The Bingo Palace*: "When women age into power, no mind can upset them...."(p.13).

She thought of letting him out, of simply opening the door and standing to one side. But then, too many passed out cold and slept in the woods. There was the danger of being run over on the roads. There was no question in her mind that if she let him go he would get himself killed. She would rather have killed him herself. She was wide awake, more alert than she had ever been. (*LM* 274-5)

The devastating responsibility and power of the maternal figure is clearly encompassed in Marie's solid frame. Her potential to violence, to the extreme of murder, is of course balanced with her power to protect. For Marie, nurturance and violence, life and death, exist in very close proximity, and are facets of her identity and presence which consolidate her domestic empowerment.²³

The reader is, of course, well aware of Marie's protective and nurturing maternal presence. Sliced in between 1981, when Albertine's and King's comments are recorded, and 1982 when Lipsha and Gordie's comments takes place, the narrative loops back to the 1930's and 1940's, documenting her life in raising her own children - biological and adopted - through particularly hard times. Nector's narrative recalls some of these times, and Marie's maternal resilience:

I liked each of our babies, but sometimes I was juggling them from both arms and losing hold. Both Marie and I lost hold. In one year, two died, a boy and a girl baby. There was a long spell of quiet, awful quiet, before the babies showed up everywhere again. They were all over in the house once they started. In the bottoms of cupboards, in the dresser, in trundles. (*LM* 126)

The tension between the temporal and narrative placement of Lipsha's, Albertine's, King's and Gordie's descriptions and experiences is perhaps the nexus of Marie's powerful maternal presence. In terms of linear time, the recollections and event I have chosen from the text, exist within the

²³ This representation of a powerful and destructive yet nurturing maternal force is in some ways similar to Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973).

space of two years. However, in terms of narrative sequence, they are separated by approximately fifty years. (Chapter Two loops back to 1934, and Marie's childhood.) The mirroring effect of the quotations between Albertine and Lipsha, King and Gordie, which sit on the edges of the temporal narrative loop, manifest a sense of constancy and perhaps even timelessness. The maternal figure is described as rock-like, and given the attributes of permanence. The Marie Kashpaw the reader knows has always displayed these features and the end brings us back to the woman in Chapter One whom the reader already knows as a strong maternal presence. With this embedded symmetry she exists in a circular temporal trajectory, and in textual terms seems to avoid the limits of existence which temporal and narrative linearity imply: even death cannot take her on its first or second try.

While in labour she first brushes with death: "Everything stopped moving around me. The walls held. I saw tiny lights of spirits enter, and although they flickered all round the edges of the room, I was not afraid. The roses on the paper stilled their breath, the circles of silvery light at the Pillager's jaw, the ghost lights, fastened my pain and dragged it through the outer walls." (*LM* 102). Her resistance to death manifests itself in tribal language: her "helping word" which pulls her through the difficult labour is one which she remembers from childhood and memory, "*baumawaebigowin*" (*LM* 102). Therefore it is her brush with death which reinstates her tribal identity which is to a great extent suppressed by her convent education and the attention of her mother who, unbeknown to Marie, is Sister Leopolda.²⁴ Marie's resistance to death manifests itself in embracing tribal identity, although Lipsha points out: "She will not admit she has a scrap of Indian blood in her." (*LM* 240). Marie negotiates a dual identity, but her resistance to death is crucial in order to establish

²⁴ Marie is unaware that Leopolda is her mother, yet this mother daughter relationship is one of the most powerful and resilient, even if it does manifest itself by abuse and violence on both sides. Indirectly perhaps Marie takes strength from Leopolda's mocking and secures domestic centrality through this. She argues that Nector, her husband, owes his success to her: "I felt my daughter's gaze train on me, but what I said was true, and Zelda knew it. She had seen me drag him back from the bootlegger's house....So she knew the truth of what I said." (*LM* 154)

her connection to a tribal heritage and for its continuance through the Kashpaw generations. On her second brush with death, when the senior citizens successfully revive her: "She sighed the way she would when somebody bothered her in the middle of a row of beads she was counting. I think it irritated her to no end that they brought her back." (*LM* 252). Marie cannot leave just yet, she must resist death for the sake of her own child Gordie, and later for Lyman Lamartine (Nector and Lulu's son) who in adulthood, still have need of her guiding, cultural and maternal force.

Marie's structural importance emerges from her domestic centrality and in connection with this her cultural centrality. When Lyman's Tomahawk factory is destroyed by the workers, Marie's presence becomes crucial. Thinking of his father, Lyman realises: "It never occurred to me that what I needed to hold onto with both hands was a mother." (*LM* 332). It is not Lulu, his biological mother, for whom he reaches but Marie, his father's wife, and the woman who he is sure will tell him that he has a place in the old traditions and is not totally lost in consumerist culture (*LM* 322). Lyman's reliance on Marie comes in two forms; she is a strong maternal figure who can offer him a sense of his father's family, and by leading him back to the old traditions she can secure for him a place in tribal culture. Since Lyman's narrative orbits around Marie Kashpaw, the fluid and culturally resilient nature of familial relationships becomes manifest in the structure of the novel. As Wong suggests: "Marie fights against tribal, family, and personal disintegration. She does so by taking on the traditional female role of insuring cultural continuity, adopting those who are left behind and helping them find a place within the family and the community."²⁵ To this I would add the text as the various chapters on or by her 'children' or husband invariably lead back to her since the characters are dependant on her strength and support as a cultural and domestic authority.

²⁵ Hertha D. Wong, "Adoptive Mothers and Throw Away Children" *Narrating Mothers*. Eds. Daly and Reddy. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), p.183.

Lulu's maternal and cultural centrality are rendered in different but equally powerful terms. Her narrative strands begin within the context of the narrative loop, and extend through 1957 to the more linear structure of the last eight chapters which are temporally situated in the 1980's. However, Lulu's narrative begins with no time specification. "The Island", where Lulu begins her narration, is the only chapter of the *Love Medicine* which is not dated. Textually it exists between 1934 (in the preceding chapter, "Wild Geese") and 1948, when the following chapter, "The Beads", takes place.²⁶ The first words in this chapter concern Lulu's relationship with her mother:

I never grew from the curve of my mother's arms. I still wanted to anchor myself against her. But she had tore herself away from the run of my life like a riverbank. She had vanished, a great surrounding shore, leaving me to spill out alone. I wanted to fill her tracks, but luck ran out the holes. My wishes were worn soles. I stumbled in those shoes of desire. Following my mother, I ran away from the government school.....I missed the old language in my mouth. Sometimes, I heard her. *N'dawnis, n'dawnis*. My daughter, she consoled me. Her voice came from all directions, mysteriously keeping me from inner harm. (LM 68-9)

Her mother, Fleur Pillager, is understood in terms of her spiritual rather than physical presence in this instance. The connection between the maternal figure and cultural continuance is demonstrated in terms of language and a spiritual guiding force. The fact that this chapter is dateless implies a timeless or eternal quality to the survival of Chippewa culture which is manifest in this strong maternal figure. This continuance manifests itself in her own domestic circumstances. Lulu has the adoration of all her boys, who have the same mother but different fathers. Gerry Nanapush, her oldest, is the son of Moses Pillager who is perhaps the last "old time" shaman of the tribe; Henry Lamartine Jr. is thought to be Bev Lamartine's son (Bev is the brother of her late husband Henry);

²⁶ Appropriately, Lulu slips in-between Nector's and Marie's narratives, perhaps mirroring her presence in their marital relationship.

and Lyman Lamartine is Nector Kashpaw's son. As one might expect, their personalities and life experiences are also diverse: Gerry is a political radical struggling to maintain cultural sovereignty; Henry goes to Vietnam, suffers post-war trauma and in the end finds suicide the only release from the torture of flashbacks; and Lyman is the "shaman pleasant entrepreneur" who becomes torn between profit and his responsibility towards the cultural identity which is so fiercely guarded by his older brother Gerry. Lulu, therefore, is the metaphoric central axis to her domestic tribe:

Lulu managed to make the younger boys obey perfectly, Bev noticed, while the older ones adored her to the point that they did not tolerate anything less from anyone else....(T)hey moved in dance steps too intricate for the non initiated eye to imitate or understand. Clearly they were of one soul. Handsome, rangy, wildly various, they were bound in total loyalty, not by oath but by the simple, unquestioning belongingness of part of one organism. (LM 118)

The only son she could not hold onto is, of course, Henry Jr. and she suffers for this because of the way he dies: "the drowned weren't allowed into the next life but were forced to wander forever....That is what I never found it easy to forget, and this is also the reason I broke custom very often and spoke Henry Junior's name, out loud on my tongue. I wanted him to know, if he heard, that he still had a home." (LM 295). She is their home, their 'centre' in life, and in Henry's case, even in death.

Both Lulu's and Marie's sense of mothering exists in a cultural matrix which emphasises, "shared responsibility...(and) the interconnectedness of all life"²⁷ which is a specific tribal perspective. Similar to Marie's relationship with Lyman, Lulu becomes the core through which Lipsha (Marie's adopted son and Lulu's grandson) can trace his lineage and his cultural identification. She reveals the truth of his mother's identity, which others are unable or unwilling to do. Ultimately, "Marie and Lulu

²⁷ Hertha D. Wong, "Adoptive Mothers and Throw Away Children" *Narrating Mothers*. Eds. Daly and Reddy. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), p.191.

represent the reality and the myth of the strong, present, nurturant Native American (grand)mother."²⁸ Their presence becomes a structural dynamic since plot, character development and the sense of community are very much at their discretion.²⁹

When Lulu's own small revelation and quasi-vision of Marie takes place, their domestic centrality is transformed into political agency. After Nector's death, Marie and Lulu grieve together, entering a new phase in their relationship. Lulu recalls: "We did not talk about Nector...We mourned him the same way together. That was the point. It was enough. For the first time I saw exactly how another woman felt, and it gave me deep comfort, surprising." (*LM* 297) Nector's death moves slightly out of focus and it is the relationship between the two women which takes on most significance. Marie volunteers to be Lulu's aide when her eyesight fails, and while putting in her eyedrops Lulu describes Marie in the following terms: "She swayed down like a dim mountain, huge and blurred, the way a mother must look at her just-born child." (*LM* 297). The birth metaphor is significant: it describes Marie in a statuesque way similar to that which Lipsha and Albertine (her grandchildren) have already used and it also gives their relationship a new beginning. Without Nector's influence there is a clearer understanding of each other, a clearer truth. Lulu's small revelation, her small vision, has substantial consequences.

This new centre of power resonates on a tribal scale, and in the case of Lulu a national scale.³⁰ Lyman discovers the true force of this matriarchal pair, both productive and destructive in their new power. In "The Tomahawk Factory" the union of the two women increases their tribal

²⁸ Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Mother Without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p.135-6.

²⁹ The fluidity of family bonds, Marie and Lyman specifically, emphasises the terms of community and collective identity, as well as explaining the textual coherence as the lives / narratives interact.

³⁰ In *The Bingo Palace* Lulu's son Gerry is on the run from prison and the authorities take Lulu in for questioning. Knowing this would happen Lulu is ready for the media and is dressed in full traditional costume when they arrive.

influence dramatically. Lulu's land is specified as the factory site and, predictably, she reacts angrily.

Indian against Indian that's how the government's money offer made us act. Here was the government Indians ordering their own people off the land of their forefather to build a modern factory. To make it worse, it was a factory that made equipment of false value. Keepsake things like bangle beads and plastic war clubs. A load of foolishness that was. (LM 283)

Eventually she concedes to the factory, as does Marie, despite their concerns about the commodification of their cultural heritage. This of course is something Lyman resents since his mother always wore Western clothes and regularly traded her car for a newer model; indeed both she and Marie and the rest of the AIM members were brought up speaking English.³¹ Lulu in her official capacity as a member of the tribe and AIM, gives him a list of jobs and who should be chosen to do each one. Lyman employs them, with the plan of "phasing them out" (LM 310). "Their statures had to be completely equal. I could show no preference. Their positions, at the beading table, which overlooked the entire workplace, had to be precisely measured. They each needed territory to control." (LM 311) Lyman becomes torn between the two not wanting to offend either, and eventually their quarrels involve the whole workforce and the factory is destroyed.

As central conspirators to the factory's fate, the power of the two women and the influence they exert over the tribe is obvious. However, as Lyman asserts, the maternal figure is not always one to be feared, and this is truly the case since Lyman is saved from the fire Nector starts in Lulu's house, because Lulu sees it in the pouring of tea. The power of love and destruction is manifest in these two women to a significant degree and

³¹ Erdrich draws attention to the difficulties of cultural authenticity in a late twentieth century context. In this example Erdrich engages with the difficulties of maintaining a collective tribal identity which can accommodate a Western influence. Clearly, a purely tribal alternative is impossible, therefore the debate centres around the *extent* to which an unmediated Western influence should be accommodated. Implicitly, this debate engages with the difficulties of trying to define a postcolonial identity. In USA the Western influence will not leave, and there can never be a return to absolute autonomy for each tribe, therefore the debate as to whether there can ever be a postcolonial identity rages on.

one which cannot be ignored. The way Lyman's life revolves, not only around his mother who exerts tremendous influence over his life, but also around Marie highlights the fluid nature of familial relationships within the tribe. The power the women exert on their children is reinforced in the narrative strategy, where different episodes in the children's lives are woven around the story of the changing relationship between the matriarchs. This in turn seems to validate the text's classification as a novel. There is a central axis embodied in this pair around which the children are able to position themselves and revolve through an admittedly episodic narrative. As Lyman suggests, "in age the women came into their own" (*LM* 303), through first or second hand experiences of death, and through the revelation of truth and wisdom manifest in their visions.

In *The Bingo Palace* Lipsha echoes Lyman's sentiments but on this occasion he is referring to Zelda Kashpaw: "When women age into power, no wind can upset them, no hand turn aside their knowledge; no fact can deflect their point of view." (*TBP* 13). Zelda, it seems, has assumed Marie's domestic and cultural centrality, but Zelda is very different from her mother. Like her mother, however, Zelda is able to negotiate her dual cultural identity: at the winter powwow she "touches the beaded sheath (of Rushes Bear / Margaret Kashpaw, Nector's mother) as if to invoke her ancestor" (*TBP* 15); and also "leads novenas for unwed mothers" (*TBP* 17). Both negotiate between Catholic and Chippewa identity and both are mothers. But while Marie's (and Lulu's) powerful maternal and cultural authority grow gradually in *Love Medicine*, which effects structural cohesion, Zelda's power is self imposed and as such structural cohesion is rendered in a different way. Where Marie's, and Lulu's centrality provide a magnetic force for their children and their narratives, Zelda's authorial position is based more on dependency and antagonism. She seems to encompass in one body the dependency she has as a child for her mother and the antagonism inherent in the resilient relationship between Marie and Leopolda. Therefore,

Zelda may have control of domestic relations and is some sense central to the narrative framework, but unlike her mother's experience and perhaps more like Leopolda's (Pauline in *Tracks*), it comes at a cost. It is not until her own resistance to death that she becomes more like her mother, knowledgeable and better placed to realise that her own domestic and cultural centrality up until that point has been domineering and counter productive.

Even at their most destructive, (for example the destruction of the Tomahawk factory) Marie's and Lulu's intentions were always for the good of the Chippewa band and their cultural identity, whereas Zelda's motives seem to have a hidden agenda. Lipsha's experience of Zelda's interference testifies to this:

Upon seeing Zelda Kashpaw, I remember to dread her goodness. I remember to fear her pity, her helping ways. She is in fact the main reason coming home is never simple: with Zelda, I am always in for something I cannot quite see but that is already built, in its final stages, erected all around....My aunt knows all there is to know. She has a deep instinct for running things. She should have more children or at least a small nation to control. Instead forced narrow, her talents run to getting people to do things they don't want to do for other people they don't like. (*TBP* 13-4)

Lipsha's paranoia does become excessive. When his car is confiscated at the Canadian border on the suspicion that it contains drugs, Lipsha believes that the date with Shawnee is ruined by Zelda: "The structure of the date had been strictly arranged, he now understood. Zelda was behind it." (*TBP* 33). Lipsha's reaction may be slightly ludicrous, but he has hit on a point that Zelda's own need is to be needed, and needed by a family and the tribe.³² This is one of the reasons she takes Shawnee Ray Toose into her home when she becomes pregnant, and since Albertine (her daughter) is studying to be a doctor, with no desire to have her own children, Shawnee's child is the only grandchild Zelda is likely to have

³² This need to mother and be in control is similar to Mary Adare's need in *The Beet Queen*.

in the short term. The relationship between the Zelda and the two girls is based on love, dependency and antagonism. Albertine reflects:

Even Shawnee's presence had been helpful at first, removing the pressure that Zelda had often brought to bear on Albertine in the past regarding marriage, a grandchild, a larger picture for Zelda to compose around herself, its center. (*TBP* 208)

Just as Marie and Lulu become the "Native American mythical grandmother" so Zelda wishes to assume this role, and what does not happen naturally, becomes forced. When Shawnee leaves Redford with her sisters Zelda takes him back by involving the courts, social workers and Lyman (Redford's father); and when Shawnee reacts to Zelda's interference objecting that "You can't get Albertine back by holding on to me" (*TBP* 119), the final blow has been dealt, "Zelda's features hardened, she firmed her shoulders, settled her hands carefully together to disguise her anxious fears." (*TBP* 119). It is not long before Shawnee collects enough money to be able to regain control of her son, her choice of lover, and her future. Therefore, although Zelda is initially a centring³³ maternal force to Shawnee, once the mutual dependence evaporates the relationship becomes one sided and antagonistic. This centre will not hold, and a less stringent and freer relationship is the desirable alternative. Reflected in this is the structural coherence where an apparently linear narrative is opened up to incorporate elements of the past, in flashback and memory, as well as the present, effecting a more fluid yet complex narrative framework.

Albertine's relationship with her mother is perhaps one of the most difficult but enduring in Erdrich's work. As a young girl of fifteen Albertine runs away from home on the reservation to the "white" town Fargo. Here she meets up with Henry Lamartine Jr., Lulu's son, and has

³³ To centre an object means to place it in the middle of a particular space. The word 'centring', in this context, is used to describe the way in which Zelda offers stability and coherence to Shawnee's domestic life; it is in this sense that the word is used throughout this thesis. The *Collins English Dictionary* defines 'centring' in the following way: "A temporary structure, esp. one made of timber,

possibly her first sexual experience. The title of this chapter is "A Bridge", and as Julie Maristuen-Rodakowski points out, "the bridge indicates the 'precarious, linked edges' (*LM* 173) of the transition from old ways to new ways. She (Albertine) is the one to cross that difficult bridge...(and) she feels panic."³⁴ With *Albertine*, Erdrich focuses on the present situation which many Native Americans are having to confront: two worlds and two very different cultural identities. In *The Bingo Palace*, Albertine is in her early twenties, still young, but beginning to assimilate her dual heritage into a meaningful personal identity. Lipsha recounts "how she went away to school, how her life got so complicated and advanced" (*TBP* 11), but she is also dancing at the winter powwow in a traditional costume she has made herself. Despite Albertine's apparent success the cultural mediation necessary to negotiate a "hybrid" identity is a difficult task. Erdrich engages directly with the difficulties of a (post) colonial society.³⁵ Erdrich does not endorse the notion that bi-cultural existence is a simple embracement of hybrid forms. The bi-cultural heritage which manifests itself to a significant degree in *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace* can cause tremendous devastation: June and Henry Jr. die or commit suicide because of their experiences in the "white" world, suggesting possibly fatal consequences of this imposition of a dual cultural matrix. Albertine perhaps is the only character who is successful in maintaining a dual cultural identity.

As with many characters in Erdrich's fiction, only by reconciling her distant relationship with Zelda (her mother) can Albertine really come to terms with her identity. As Debra C. Holt suggests: "Erdrich's most successful characters find their place within a family. This family

used to support an arch during construction." This, I think, is a rather appropriate metaphor to describe the vital, but sometimes transitory, role of the mothers in Erdrich's narrative strategy.

³⁴ Julie Maristuen-Rodakowski, "The Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota: Its History as Depicted in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* and *Beet Queen*" *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 12:3 (1988): 33-48, p.44.

³⁵ According to Krupat, and presumably many other critics and theorists concerned with the distinction between the colonial and postcolonial experience in the USA, the term *postcolonial* is inappropriate since tribal groups remain a colonised people - there is no recourse to a traditional way of life, only full, or partial, assimilation into Western culture. See Arnold Krupat, *The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism & Culture*. (1996. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

however consists of more than blood relatives. Its vast and fluid boundaries encompass the larger community and nature as well".³⁶ Albertine spends the formative years of her life resisting her mother's affection. At the beginning of *Love Medicine*, she recalls how "I'd provided her with years of grinding grief. I had gone through a long phase of wickedness and even run away. Yet now that I was on the straight and narrow, things were even worse between us" (*LM* 11). The play on the phrase "Patient Abuse" (*LM* 7) in her medical book neatly invokes their slow, but constant antagonism towards each other while she lives and studies in Fargo. By the end of *The Bingo Palace* she has stopped pulling from her mother and the anonymous third person narrator suggests Albertine is arriving at a clearer understanding of her past and her present. Their relationship enters a new phase of acceptance as the importance of her relationship with her mother is foregrounded while she remembers her experience with Henry Jr.

She never dared fold herself against her mother, never dared to grab her tight, but only swept her lips against the porous, fine skin of her cheek, touched her work-tough fingers. Even that hurt, and once, in bed with a man she hated, paralyzed with what she'd done, Albertine had realised that the desperation with which she gave into his touch had been no more than a child's wish to crawl closer to the side of her mother. (*TBP* 209)

Albertine spends her life pulling from her mother emotionally, only to work her way back to a realisation of the love she craved as a child. From birth to adulthood and back again to the recollections of her youth Albertine begins to make sense of the relationship with her mother and consequently comes to a better understanding of her personal and cultural identity. Their relationship is described in terms of a circular trajectory which traces Albertine's emotional journey, her journey to and from the reservation and is structured across the boundaries of both texts, *Love*

³⁶ Debra C. Holt, "Transformation and Continuance: Native American Tradition in the Novels of Louise Erdrich" *Entering the 90's: The North American Experience*. Ed Thomas E. Schirer (Proceedings from the Native American Studies Conference at Lake Superior State University, October 27-28, 1989; Lake Superior State University Press, 1991), p.159.

Medicine and *The Bingo Palace*. Just as Albertine has to negotiate an identity between two cultural paradigms, her relationship with her mother will retain a shuttling motion. Similarly, Erdrich's narrative style destabilises tensions between Chippewa and Western tradition; between the oral storytelling tradition and the western novel; and between circular and linear narrative trajectories.

Zelda's attempts to impose her Catholic and Chippewa values on others in order to become the central force in a domestic and cultural power base is self-defeating: "Zelda sewed everything too tight, pulled her thread until it broke." (*TBP* 210). It becomes evident that her need to be needed by family and the community, is to some extent a smokescreen, concealing something far deeper. Lulu's and Marie's strength to a large extent came from their own fulfilment and acquired knowledge as mothers, as wives, and in Lulu's case, as a lover. When Zelda suffers a heart attack, she realises that she made a mistake in not reciprocating Xavier Toose's love.³⁷ She rejected Xavier because she wanted to marry a white man; she does this and is left alone with Albertine. Therefore, like Marie, her brush with death brings her closer to understanding that a coherent identity is based on honesty about her commitment to Chippewa culture and fulfilment of her own desires. She goes to Xavier to smoke her father's pipe, but it is left in the car as they walk towards his home (*TBP* 247). Zelda's homecoming, that is her relocation to Indian identification through Xavier, helps centre her maternal and cultural identity. By fulfilling her own desires she is capable of understanding Shawnee's love for Lipsha, even if he is not Redford's father. With her resistance of death comes the revelation of truth, one which had been denied even to herself, and in this end there is beginning and the real possibility of rebuilding domestic bonds and those to the wider community. Only in her last appearance in the novel does her domestic and cultural centrality seem a natural possibility. Just as Zelda acquires a more fully developed tribal identity throughout the text, so June, in

relation to Lipsha, acquires a more nurturing and influential maternal identity. Both gradually acquire a central, and centring, role in *The Bingo Palace*, which is comparable but dissimilar to that of Lulu and Marie in *Love Medicine*.

In *The Bingo Palace*, therefore, both the encompassing narratives and central stabilising aspects are more concerned with continuation than resolution and in this respect the narrative coherence is more difficult to locate than is the case with the explicit narrative strategies of *Love Medicine*. The narrative encoding of *The Bingo Palace* exists at a level beneath the deceptively linear surface, patterned as I have argued with reference to thematic and structural coherence³⁸. The narrative structures, which incorporate ideas of western chronological time and Native American cyclical time, become problematic due to this double trajectory. Erdrich deliberately destabilises the Western tradition of the realist novel and by dismantling the framework she creates a narrative mode which engages with the (post)colonial condition Owens describes:

Regardless of how effectively a novel may incorporate the cyclically ordered, ritual centred and paradigmatic world of traditional oral literatures, try as he or she may, the Native American novelist can never step back into collective anonymity of the tribal storyteller.³⁹

Erdrich creates a narrative form which accepts the fact that the anonymous and cyclical nature of the oral traditions cannot be reproduced unchanged, but they can be reinvented for a twentieth century reader. By transgressing the normative codes of time and narratorial stability, and by carefully incorporating salient thematic concerns, tribal traditions can be and are (re)introduced to the contemporary reader. The cyclical trajectory, however, has a dual function: firstly, to invoke ties

³⁷ Xavier is Zelda's first love, an Indian boy who waits outside her window all night for her agreement to marry him. She refuses and he loses the fingers on one hand through frost-bite.

³⁸ The narrative patterning is rendered thematically and structurally in the exploration of maternal centrality and encasement. In addition to this the resistance to death and the 'revelation' of truth results in a resistance to closure rather than a final conclusion which a linear teleological patterning would harbour.

with the oral traditions of the past, and secondly, to hold the narrative fragments in a framework which is not entirely stable, but never verges on chaos. Resilient mother-child bonds ensure narrative coherence as they encompass and centre the narratives, and closely linked with this are meditations on death and truth which escape finality and as such refuse conclusive hermeneutic interpretation. The norms of closure are not only resisted but are inappropriate to a cultural matrix which insists on the continuation of life in the physical world after death, as well as insisting on the continuation of cultural and clan family structures after (but including) the changes brought by colonisation. The process of colonisation is considered in the third chapter of this thesis as it relates to thematic and structural concerns of *Tracks*.

³⁹ Louis Owens, *Other Destinies*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992) p.11.

Chapter 3

Who is your Father? Negotiating Genealogical and Cultural Origins in *Tracks*.

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things which in truth are about one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present day consent, the desire to live together; the will to perpetuate the value of heritage that one has received in an undivided form.¹

In *Tracks* Erdrich is very much concerned with the survival of Chippewa tradition in an increasingly colonised land and culture. Although she may make concessions to Renan's definition of a nation in terms of its soul and spiritual principle, the legacy of memories, and the present desire to live together, the understanding that the notion of nationhood is passed down through the generations in an "undivided form" is deeply problematic: this would be complicit with an essentialist paradigm which is divisive and hierarchical. Indeed it is precisely this doubt about "authentic" origins of culture and history which concerns Erdrich, particularly in *Tracks*. The narrative is split between two narrators: Nanapush, the oldest remaining member of the tribe, whose name links him to the traditional trickster narratives, and Pauline Puyat, a mixed blood, who denies her Indian heritage and throws herself into the extremes of Catholic dogma at the cost of her sanity. Since two very different cultures, Chippewa and Catholic / Western, exist in such close proximity the difficulty of identifying any "pure" cultural identity becomes increasingly difficult. As the next generation appears the problem of cultural identity is confounded further, which my discussion of *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace* illustrates. However, in this chapter I will concentrate on the older generations.

¹ Ernst Renan, "What is a Nation?", *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi Bhabha. (London: Routledge, 1990)

Initially I will consider Pauline Puyat, a mixed blood who experiences serious confusion about her cultural identity - a major factor in her mental breakdown. Her cultural heritage and spiritual principles (manifest in the identity of her spiritual guide or "father") are important, particularly when she becomes pregnant. Secondly, I will consider Erdrich's attempts to trace Chippewa cultural origins by referring to Fleur Pillager and the undisclosed identity of the father of her first child, Lulu. The different ways Erdrich represents the maternal figure (with Pauline and Fleur) is pertinent to this discussion on genealogical and cultural origins, since the perception and status of the maternal figure is shown to be dependant on cultural context. As I will argue with reference to the relationship between Fleur (mother) and Pauline (child), the unmediated collision of these two cultural paradigms can have disastrous, even fatal, consequences. Finally I will consider the narrative structure and discuss the effects of Erdrich's decision to combine two narrators whose epistemological traditions and cultural identities are so keenly opposed.

Pauline is one of the few protagonists in *Tracks* who has to deal with a dual cultural identity due to her genealogical ties. Having Chippewa ancestors on one side, and white Canadian on the other, she finds herself drawn only to the white, Catholic beliefs of her Canadian heritage.

I wanted to be like my Grandfather, pure Canadian. That was because even as a child I saw that to hang back was to perish. I saw through the eyes of the world outside us. I would not speak our language. (T 14)

"Our language" soon becomes "their" language when at a later stage in the novel she distances herself further, situating herself firmly outside the tribal community: " 'The Indians,' I said now, 'them'. Never *neenawind* or us." (T 138). The irony is that the more Pauline tries to pull

away from her Chippewa heritage and traditions the more it controls her. Therefore, although Pauline throws herself into Western culture and religious beliefs, her experiences testify that this is not an easy existence. Pauline is deliberately set up as an antithesis to Chippewa culture. She and Nanapush (whose name invokes the tradition of the Trickster hero in the oral narratives) vie for narratorial authority; and Fleur, whom she describes as the "hinge" to the 'other' side, is the embodiment of everything which Pauline has rejected.

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. It was like that with Him, too, Our Lord, who had obviously made the whites more shrewd, as they grew in number, all around, some even owing automobiles, while the Indians receded and coughed to death and drank. (*T* 139)

However, Pauline is also the location of this conflict as both cultures / religions become intermingled in her mind.² Because Pauline believes in the shamanic powers of Moses Pillager who made not only her "dream-catcher" (*T* 66) in an attempt to ward off her nightmares but also the love medicine which she gives to Eli and Sophie (more of which later), her unmediated identification with Catholicism and her religious vocation is difficult to reconcile. The fact that she is the unmarried mother of Napoleon Morrissey's child further ironises her religious ambitions, which centre on emulating the *Virgin Mary*. It would be fair to argue that with Pauline the Catholic perspective is the dominating feature, but therein, the clarity of the boundaries between Native and Western epistemologies becomes confused. The occasion of the love medicine and her pregnancy are key events in this conflict.

² Whether this is a cause or a symptom of Pauline's mental breakdown is left ambiguous. The exact origins of her madness are veiled; this is quite suitable for a text which is trying to un-fix the perception that culture and cultural identity can exist in an undivided form.

Pauline tricks Eli into taking the love medicine Moses Pillager has created, and there follows a passionate sexual affair between Eli and Sophie. Knowing that she could never attract Eli herself, Pauline engineers the affair in such a way which does not limit her participation. Not only does she spy on the couple but she perceives that she experiences and controls the couple's sexual encounter from her hidden location in the bush. Pauline's voyeuristic attitude towards their relationship is disturbing, and creates interpretative ambiguity.

I turned my thoughts on the girl and entered her and made her do what she could never have dreamed of herself....They went on and on. They were not allowed to stop. They could drown, still moving, breathe water in exhaustion. I drove Eli to the peak and then took his relief away and made him start again. I don't how long, how many hours....I was pitiless. They where mechanical things, toys, dolls wound past their limits. I let them stop eventually, I don't know how or when.
(T 83-4)

Since Pauline has rejected her Chippewa heritage, her ability to project her mind, body, and desires on to Eli and Sophie's sexual encounter is somewhat ambivalent. She has thrown in her lot with her European heritage. Therefore, the text somehow privileges a Western interpretation based on a psychological, rational, and anti-spiritual perspective. This is at the cost of a tribal interpretation based on the possibility of spiritual and / or psychic projection,³ which becomes more apparent when compared with Nanapush's psychic / spiritual projection into Eli's mind when he brings him safely home from the hunt.

Each time he speeded up I slowed him. I strengthened the rhythm whenever he faltered beneath the weight he bore. In that way, he returned, and when I could hear the echo of his panting breath, I went outside to help him, still in my song. (T 104)

³ In her presently unpublished article "Where the Maps Stopped" (p.19/20) Rita Ferrari comments on the different interpretative strategies employed by the reader when considering Pauline's narrative about her psychic / spiritual control of Eli and Sophie and then goes on to consider Nanapush's psychic / spiritual projections which bring Eli safely home from the hunt. My ideas in this section are, in part, indebted to Ferrari's observation.

Pauline's experience of Eli and Sophie's sexual encounter, compared with Nanapush's spiritual guidance creates a conflict between the motives of good and evil; Nanapush's guidance will ensure the survival of the much diminished tribe whereas Pauline's motives are for her own selfish gain. In this way comparison between the motives of the two narrators can be read as a struggle between the opposing priorities of two very different epistemological traditions: between Chippewa (tribal) and Western (European) which can be translated as the difference between a belief in the primacy of the community (tribal) and a belief in the primacy of the individual (Western). This comparison highlights the differences of two very different interpretative paths into which the reader is led in *Tracks*. The Western perspective (psychological / rational interpretation) firmly delineates the limits of human psychic or spiritual existence, whereas the Chippewa perspective is less restrictive since the boundaries between physical existence, and psychic or spiritual powers are significantly more fluid.

Although Pauline's motives are centred around individual rather than collective good, her narrative may also be considered within a tribal context, inciting interpretative conflict within her own psyche, and her own narrative. If there are grounds to believe that she is convinced of the power which the love medicine holds then there must be the possibility that Pauline is capable of similar psychic projection to Nanapush. The privileging of this tribal interpretative framework emphasises, not Pauline's "true" spiritual identity, but rather a perversion of the true spirit of the ancient psychic / spiritual mystery. However, as Alan Velie rightly indicates: "(W)e cannot trust her (Pauline) to distinguish fantasy from reality. Although we may strongly suspect that supernatural events are occurring, we cannot be sure."⁴

⁴ Alan Velie, "Magical Realism and Ethnicity: The Fantastic In the Fiction of Louise Erdrich" *Women in Native American Literature and Culture*. Eds. Castillo and Da Rosa. (Porto: Fernando Pessoa University Press, 1997) p.65. The irony in the novel, however, is that Fleur, the "funnel" of Chippewa

Later, when Sophie appears outside Fleur's house in the hope of an acknowledgement of her relationship with Eli, Pauline's reaction to the event indicates a deeper psychological crisis. Pauline's experience this time is contextualised within a Catholic framework which allows a belief in miracles and the possible revelation (rather than contingency) of knowledge. When the statue of the Virgin Mary is placed before Sophie in an effort to release her from the trance induced by the love medicine, a symbolic battle between Catholicism and Chippewa / tribal spirituality takes place. However, the focus retracts from Sophie, Eli, and how this betrayal affects Fleur, and concentrates on Pauline's experience.

Pauline relates how the statue cried solid tears, and in an effort to explain this phenomena, she eroticises the apparently miraculous event by projecting on to it her own sexual experiences.

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 one night without his body, which was hard, pitiless, but so warm slipping out of me that tears always formed in my eyes, I knew 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. (T 95)

Thus by projecting her own experience onto this event, she creates a parallel with Mary and constructs grounds on which she can identify herself. However, her attempts to emulate Mary rest on changing the Catholic belief in Mary's virginity and overlapping the event with her

culture and the victim of Eli's betrayal, seems unconvinced that Eli is unaccountable for his actions - love medicine or not - confounding interpretative certainty even further.

own sexual experience with Napoleon. In a most unusual way (through the ramblings of a madwoman) Erdrich touches on a potentially difficult problem encountered by western feminists; that is the irreconcilable tension between the maternal role and an abstract notion of purity manifest in Catholic dogma.⁵

Pauline's sexual encounters with Napoleon inevitably lead to pregnancy. Since Pauline has rejected all connection to her tribal past, and has constructed her identity around Christian doctrine, her maternal experience is very different from Fleur's (whose experience I will consider later) and is therefore represented in a very different context. Within the paradigm of an admittedly zealous brand of Catholicism, Pauline has to reconcile her very real sexuality - the product of which is growing inside her - and her psychological and religious need to be like Mary - pure and virginal. (Hence the significance of her vision eroticising the conception of Christ, which changes the biblical legend to fit Pauline's reality.) Pauline's experience of pregnancy is one of shame until she convinces herself that, as was the case with Mary, the father of her child was not human. Instead of God's being the father it was Satan whom she imagined "pinned me with his horns" (*T* 133). For some the mention of Satan might be figurative, but in the bounds of Pauline's vivid imagination and unbalanced mental state the intention must be that she believes her own fantasy. Again under the illusion that God has spoken to her, she feels He has forgiven her (*T* 137) and it is His wish that the child should die. Bernadette manages to prevent her from aborting the baby

⁵ Despite Pauline's madness perhaps her interpretation makes more sense. Indeed this engagement with the whore / madonna complex perpetuated in the West by years of religious dogma and social acceptance, has been the subject of much feminist inquiry, particularly Marina Warner's *Alone of All Her Sex*. (1976. Great Britain: Weidenfeld and Nicholson Ltd; London: Picador, 1990), and, Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" [*Tel Quel* Winter 74 (1977): 30-49] *The Kristeva Reader*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Ed. Toril Moi. (1986. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). Kristeva writes that around the time of Blanche of Castille who died 1252, "the virgin explicitly became the focus of courtly love, thus gathering the attributes of the desired woman and of the holy mother in a totality as accomplished as it was inaccessible. Enough to make any woman suffer, any man dream." ("Stabat Mater", p.171) With Pauline, in *Tracks*, Erdrich engages with the inconsistencies towards feminine / maternal identity manifest in Catholic dogma specifically. This is tackled in a similar way in some of her poetry. See, *Jacklight* and *Baptism of Desire*.

herself, but Pauline's determination to kill her child and die in her own labour is almost too powerful:

If I gave birth, I would be lonelier. I saw, and I saw too well. I would be an outcast, a thing set aside for God's use, a human who could be touched by no other human. Marie! I shook with effort, held back, reduced myself to something tight, round, and very black clenched around my child so that she could not escape. I became a great stone, a boulder set under a hill.....I held still and howled and in the interludes I told Bernadette I had decided to die, and let the child too, no taint of original sin on her unless she breathed air.
(T 135)

In the end however : "We were divided." (T 136). At the point of separation Pauline experiences isolation and individuation which underpins this as one of the most poignant and disturbing scenes in the novel. It is also one of the few times, if not the only time in all of Erdrich's fiction, that Pauline elicits such depth of sympathy from the reader. Indeed the genuine love she has for her child must be recognised, just as it must also be acknowledged that due to Pauline's particular circumstances it is expressed in terms of anguish rather than fulfilment. Erdrich is of course touching on the dilemma which affects most fundamentalist Christian groups, that is, how to deal with woman as a sexual autonomous being - in short, the unmarried mother. Determined to live within the bounds of her own extreme brand of Catholicism, Pauline lets Bernadette adopt her child, thus escaping the shame which the birth of an illegitimate child in a Catholic context demands. As a consequence she falls deeper into her own brand of mysticism and martyrdom, creating an identity which is to remain with her throughout Erdrich's other novels, especially *Love Medicine*.

Some saints endured burning pitch or red-hot tongs. Some were torn asunder by lions or, like Perpetua, exposed to a mad heifer that flourished its hooves. There was Ceclia, who outlived her own beheading, and Saint Blaise, combed to death with an iron

rake....Predictable shapes these martyrdoms. Mine took another form.

Embarrassment. I counselled myself to suffer Nanapush. If the history is written of my endurance, let it report that I never toppled, never gave way to fury, but tried with gentle patience to hoist his soul out of the slop pail. (T 152)

In her religious attitudes, Pauline has devoted her life to assimilating Western ideology, not simply in terms of her attempts to convert individual Chippewas like Nanapush or Fleur.⁶ Rather, she is obsessed with gaining enough "spiritual" strength to conquer Chippewa existence at its mythical source, that is to conquer Misshepesu - one of the few Chippewa supernatural powers remaining in the fictional reality of Erdrich's fiction. One of her last acts is to challenge Misshepesu, a fight to the death, which she must undertake since "Christ had hidden out of frailty" (T 195). However, she is unable to sustain any coherent perspective on reality, Misshepesu becomes synonymous with Satan, but in reality Pauline's physical engagement is with Napoleon Morrissey.

My fingers closed like hasps of iron, locked on the strong rosary chain, wrenched and twisted the beads close about his neck until his face darkened and he lunged away. I hung on while he bucked and gagged and finally fell, his long tongue dragging down my thighs. (T 202)

Misshepesu is not defeated, but significantly Napoleon, her only lover and father of her child is killed. Thus in a desperate attempt to forget her past, her sexuality, her daughter, and her Chippewa heritage, she becomes unable to separate reality from illusion. It is a strain too great for Pauline Puyat. Her last act is to change her name: "I prayed before I spread the scrap of paper in air. I asked for the grace to accept, to leave Pauline behind, to remember that my name, any name, was no more than a

⁶ In Vine Deloria Jr.'s, *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. (1969. London: The Macmillan Company, 1970), he argues that the normal practice of converting or "saving" Indians was to focus primarily on the individual rather than the tribe as a collective entity (p.102). Again this is a process which marks a significant difference in attitude between the primacy of the collective, encouraged by the tribal world view, and the primacy of the individual, encouraged by the Western / Christian world

crumbling skin. *Leopolda*, I tried it out the unfamiliar syllables. They fit. They crackled in my ears like a fist through ice." (T 205). On her own terms she is transcending human frailty, but perhaps it is truer to say that without any real connections with others, without a sense of identity liveable within a Catholic paradigm, her only option is to create for herself one which *she* believes in; one where her daughter, her sexuality, her maternal feelings, and her Chippewa heritage can be denied and escaped forever.

In Pauline's aspirations to be "white" like her grandfather, her spiritual father is the Christian God; thus she engages fully with a religious patriarchal hierarchy. However, Satan is embodied by, or confused with, Misshepesu - representative of Chippewa culture. Furthermore, her eroticisation of particular events, and the birth of her child signify the presence of a feminine sexuality which is untenable with Catholic doctrine. Pauline can therefore be seen as a victim of her beliefs and mentally disorientated by her "spiritual father" - the Catholic God - as her identity becomes a unmediated mixture of Catholic and Chippewa maxims. A sense of identity is untenable without coherent epistemological strategies, whether they are understood to be from single or mixed origins.

In contrast, Fleur's experience of being an unmarried mother and the physical experience of childbirth differs dramatically in its cultural context and as such is understood in entirely different terms. Where Pauline's identity is wrapped up in a Catholic paradigm of purity and virginity, Fleur's identity is located in a tribal context which celebrates the maternal figure on a spiritual level. To compare the differences briefly: Pauline's child is pulled out by Bernadette with black iron spoons, whereas Fleur gives her final push when a bear (which has special spiritual significance in Chippewa tradition) bursts into her

view. Pauline may be a product of individualism, which underlies Western / Christian perception of

cabin.⁷ This alone signifies a vast difference between two cultures and their respective attitudes towards childbearing. Moreover, the fact that Fleur remains an "unmarried" mother is an inappropriate description since it imposes a Western religious / legal tradition on a non-western social fabric. Thus Fleur is not subject to the same moral dilemmas concerning her sexuality and maternal status which Pauline chooses to endure. In many ways Fleur fares much better than Pauline, although her story is not without its own doubts and difficulties.

"Mindemoya's in town," I inform her without a preview....

"She comes in on her feast day, gets supplies" I state, when Lulu doesn't answer.

"Not her feast day. My dad's." She speaks briefly and flips the meat, keeps on stirring something with a metal spoon. A purple smell rushes at me. She is cooking a pot of chokecherry jelly.

"Who was he?"

She turns arches her thin black eyebrows, and gives the pan a sudden, annoyed shake.

That is my cue to quit, I know it, but this time I want more. My father's eyes, shrouded full of Nanapush light, watch me from my Grandma's knickknack shelf. My family people full of secrets, things they hide from each other and themselves.

Beginnings are lost in time and the ends of things are unpronounceable. (TBP 129)

Lipsha Morrissey is intrigued to discover the identity of Lulu's "dad" - his great-grandfather. Lulu attempts to create an intriguing silence by alluding to, but never explaining, his feast day. In fact only Fleur

self, but her "missionary" project is much wider in scope.

⁷According to Hallowell and Barnouw, the bear is particularly important to Chippewa history. The bear is given similar status to humans, and the tales which surround the bear suggest that sorcerers can take their form, through metamorphosis, or spiritual projection, after they had killed a man. They are regarded with fear and reverence. See A. Irving Hallowell, "Ojibwa World View" *The North American Indians: A Sourcebook*. Eds. Owen, Deetz and Fisher. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967) p. 225; and *Wisconsin Chippewa Myths and Tales*. Ed. Victor Barnouw (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997) p.140.

Pillager knows the truth, and her silence on the matter is absolute.

Pauline Puyat, aware of the gossip at the time, reveals:

That spring, I went to help out in her cabin when she bore the child whose green eyes and skin the color of an old penny have made more talk, as no one can decide if the child is mixed blood or what, fathered in a smokehouse, or by a man with brass scales, or by the lake. The girl (Lulu) is bold, smiling in her sleep, as if she knows what people wonder, as if she hears the old men talk, turning the story over. It comes up different every time, and has no ending and no beginning. They get the middle wrong too. They only know they don't know anything. (T 31)

In *Tracks*, Erdrich's fascination with biological and cultural lineage manifests itself to a significant degree with the mystery surrounding Lulu's birth. As in her other novels, bloodlines and cultural origins become noticeably interdependent. In *Tracks*, however, the attempt to locate fundamental cultural principles unmediated by Western influence (which Fleur hopes will prevail and ensure tribal survival and continuance) become as elusive as the identity of Lulu's father. The different explanations of Lulu's parentage are particularly interesting since they reveal different systems of beliefs and histories where a Western perspective is complicated by a Chippewa worldview.

There are several explanations as to the identity of Lulu's biological father, but I will begin with Fleur's rape in Argus, which could have resulted in her pregnancy. Then I will consider her encounter with Misshepesu, the lake monster, followed by Eli (Fleur's lover) who could also be Lulu's father. Finally I will consider Nanapush, whom the reader knows is not her biological father but her legal father, and is a life giving force of a different kind. I will consider each one individually, since each explanation demands a different cultural and spiritual context.

The first interpretation is that Fleur, while in Argus, working and gambling for money to pay taxes on Pillager land, is raped by three men,

Dutch, Tor and Lily. The men had lost their money to Fleur in a card game, and whether it was her gender or Native cultural identity which offended them most seems hardly to matter. Whatever the case, they presumed they possessed the physical power to control and dominate. The metaphor of the land as feminine and Fleur as symbolic of the land at the point of colonisation is interesting when viewed in terms of gender and Native identity. Annette Kolodny, in *The Lay of the Land*, discusses in depth the issues surrounding the attitude of the European settlers towards the land and analyses the problems and stereotypes created by the feminisation of the landscape. In particular she notes:

Colonisation brought with it an inevitable paradox: the success of settlement depended on the ability to master the land, transforming the virgin territories into something else - a farm a village, a road, a canal, a railway, a mine, a factory, a city and finally an urban nation.....(W)as there possibly a need to experience the land as a nurturing, giving maternal breast because of the threatening, alien, and potentially emasculating terror of the unknown?...In a sense, to make the new continent Woman was already to civilise it a bit, casting a stamp of human relations upon what was otherwise unknown and untamed.⁸

Colonisers had built the towns and the churches, anchored new religions and unquestioned male hierarchies in the landscape and the psyche. Fleur is forced to engage with this to ensure her own cultural survival. The Catholic steeple is the most prominent feature, one which attracts Fleur: "Maybe in that raw space it (that marker) drew her the way a lone tree draws lightning. Maybe, in the end the Catholics are to blame. For if she hadn't seen that sign of pride, that slim prayer, maybe she would have just kept walking" (*T* 13). This initial connection with Catholicism is interesting because where the usual process was for the conversion of

⁸ Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of The Land* (1975. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984) p.7.

Natives,⁹ Fleur arrives as an equal, holding a similar pride in her religious beliefs. Argus becomes a site of exchange and coexistence: "the first place she went to once she came to town was to the back door of the priest's residence attached to the landmark church. She didn't go there for a handout, although she got that, but to ask for work. She got that too, or we got her." (T 13) In the beginning the West and Native, Catholic and Chippewa, masculine and feminine, meet and co-exist, but this does not last. Fleur discovers to her cost, that there are those whose sins can neither be endured nor forgiven.

Dutch, Tor and Lily, her co-workers and co-gamblers, rape Fleur because of greed and a belief in the right of male possession. She wins their money at poker and they take her body - justifying their actions in a reductive way similar to that with which European colonisers justified the "rape" of the land. Fleur's power over the natural elements (shown when she raises the storm that causes the men's deaths), is Erdrich's attempt to address the issue of Western male appropriation of landscape, women and culture which Kolodny discusses at length in *The Lay of The Land*. When Fleur is raped, Erdrich raises questions about the ethical and legal rights over the ownership of land, the female body, and the effects on non-Western groups who resist Western dominance. Fleur finds that despite engaging with capitalism, and despite her faith in Pillager shamanic powers, there are limits to her ability to hold off Western appropriation of her land. She may be able to raise a storm big enough to flatten most of Argus (and sets the conditions for the deaths of Tor and Lily) and later, in a last act of resistance she raises another storm which destroys Turcot's (the lumber company's) machinery and homes (T 222-224); but in the end her spiritual power / presence remains a redundant act of despair since she cannot halt the progress of the "frontier" mentality.

⁹ Vine Deloria Jr. covers the issue and strategies of Christian conversion in *God Is Red*. (New York: Dell, 1973), and *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. (1969. London: The Macmillan Company, 1970).

Another possible father-figure for Lulu is Misshepeshu and in this version of events the reader is led into a tribal epistemological tradition.¹⁰ As Brehm summarises; "Micipijiu (Misshepeshu in Erdrich's fiction) is one key she encodes in her texts to reveal a non-western perspective where time is circular and *manidog* (spirits) exists in the present as well as the past."¹¹ Brehm's article traces quite comprehensively the various transformations which Micipijiu has undergone. Interestingly the origin of the lake monster myths is uncertain; indeed anthropologists cannot decide if its "existence" was established before or after European contact. However it is clear that Micipijiu's existence, or purpose, is transformed in relation to the needs and circumstances of the Chippewa tribes at various points in their history, confounding efforts to trace an exact point of origin:

His role in creation myths was to enforce wise use of renewable sources to prevent their exhaustion; in the late Mide ceremonies to reinforce culturally sanctioned means of gaining power and economic security; in Erdrich's work he represents the power of American Indian spirituality and tradition which are being drowned in American culture.¹²

In the fictional world of *Tracks* and *The Bingo Palace* Misshepeshu is perceived by the Chippewas (Fleur especially) as a source of power capable of resisting Western capitalism and encroachment on the land (Brehm). Fleur's relationship with Misshepeshu, however, is quite unique, and in *Tracks* particularly it is the tradition of the "animal groom / demon lover" stories which are most pertinent.

¹⁰ Misshepeshu or Micipijiu is the lake monster, a prominent figure in Chippewa myth and legend who is both feared and revered. For further reading on the changing status of Misshepeshu in tribal myth see Victor Barnourw (Ed.), *Wisconsin Chippewa Myths and Tales*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977); and Victoria Brehm, "The Metamorphosis of an Ojibwa *Manido*", *American Literature* 68:4 (1996): 677-706.

¹¹ Victoria Brehm, "The Metamorphosis of an Ojibwa *Manido*", *American Literature* 68:4 (1996): 677-706, p.679/80.

¹² Victoria Brehm, "The Metamorphosis of an Ojibwa *Manido*", *American Literature* 68:4 (1996): 677-706, p.682.

In animal groom tales a woman mates with a supernatural, frequently a beast. She may be given or sold to him by relatives; she may seek him herself; or he may attack her and she will either resist successfully or be captured.¹³

Pauline suggests that Fleur has "mated" with Misshepeshu; after all she has drowned three times in Lake Matchimanito, where Misshepeshu lives; and Misshepeshu is "....a thing of dry foam, a thing of death by drowning, the death a Chippewa cannot survive. Unless you are Fleur Pillager" (T 11). It must be noted that it is Pauline - established early on as one "given to improving the truth" (T 39) - who encourages the reader to believe this version of events. But, it is significant that Eli - Fleur's lover / husband - is also partly convinced of this truth: "I dreamed how it will look, strange and fearful, bulging eyes, maybe with a split black tail." (T 108). Nanapush laughs, disparaging the very idea, but dreams are as important in Chippewa culture as consciously witnessed events.¹⁴ The truth therefore is an unstable entity and is further destabilised by the description of Fleur's child as cat-like, with green eyes, and her skin is the "colour of an old penny" - brass or copper like the colour of Misshepeshu's scales. The references to Misshepeshu are striking, and the old stories of Micipijiu are suggested if not fully revealed. According to the myth and ritual surrounding such sexual contact, Fleur would secure "powers of sorcery that could kill an enemy miles away..."¹⁵ and Lulu becomes the product and continuance of a specific cultural tradition and ancient spiritual beliefs. By combining Fleur's powers and identity with the powers of Misshepeshu, a figure both feared and revered, Erdrich creates in Fleur a powerful maternal presence where feminine strength is also (and always) in close connection with the living

¹³ Victoria Brehm, "The Metamorphosis of an Ojibwa *Manido*", *American Literature* 68:4 (1996): 677-706, p.685.

¹⁴ A. Irving Hallowell in "Ojibwa World View" *The North American Indians: A Sourcebook*. Eds. Owen, Destz and Fisher. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), notes that "far from being of subordinate importance, such experiences (dreams) are for them (the Ojibwa) often of more vital importance than the events of daily waking life. Why is this so? Because it is in dreams that the individual comes into direct communication with *atiso'kanak*, the powerful 'persons' of the other than human class" (p.228).

commitment to the survival and development of Chippewa culture / religion.

Eli is Lulu's putative father. And in this instance, it is human love and passion which is the backdrop of Lulu's conception. Fleur, a woman who has no financial need for a man, who has no need for a man in terms of physical survival, perhaps needs Eli in an emotional way. Female desire is here described as something passionate, beautiful, strong and frightening. When Eli betrays her with Sophie, Fleur's anger has the power to break Eli, and almost does. The stereotypes of Woman and the Feminine which cross the boundaries between Native and Western tradition, are here considered by Erdrich in a way which counters centuries of male appropriation. Mary Dearborn writes: "The image of the Indian woman in American culture has been split into that of the noble princess and that of the randy and fertile squaw, and (that) the image of the Indian woman has suffered from what is in effect a cultural whore/madonna complex".¹⁶ Erdrich attempts to redress this balance by figuring the female desire for physical and emotional fulfilment as something which sustains life, in terms of human survival, and in terms of cultural traditions. When the famine sets in the tribe are given hope when Eli and Fleur's love endures and survives the trials of Eli's betrayal.

That winter, holes were chopped in Matchimanito and our people fished with no concern for the lake man down there, no thought but food. People stood on the ice for hours, waiting, slapping themselves, with nothing to occupy them but their hunger and their children's hunger. It was natural that to take their minds off their own problems, they would cast their eyes to shore and learn a thing or two about what was happening with Fleur Pillager and Eli Kashpaw... These cries were full of pleasure, strange and wonderful to hear, sweet as the taste of last summer's fruit... Sounds carried so well through the hollow

¹⁵ Victoria Brehm, "The Metamorphosis of an Ojibwa *Manido*", *American Literature* 68:4 (1996): 677-706, p.681.

¹⁶ Mary Dearborn, *Pocahontas's Daughters: Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

air, even laughing whispers, that people stood fast, let the chill reach deep into their bones, until they heard the satisfaction of silence. Then they turned away and crept back with hope. Faintly warmed, they leaned down to gather in their icy lines.
(*T* 130)

To talk about human love is perhaps abstract and yet desirable since it offers hope to a diminishing culture. An important point to note is that Fleur is referred to as Eli's "wife" (*T* 108) by Nanapush although this should not be understood in the Western legal sense; indeed her status as married or unmarried in the Western sense is irrelevant. Consequently the female body is perceived as autonomous, and Erdrich inscribes Fleur's female / feminine identity with its own physical and emotional needs. Simultaneously, however, it is also the focus for tribal survival and is therefore defined synecdochically as part of a larger whole. By aligning the fulfilment of Fleur's own desire with the cultural survival of the tribe, Erdrich addresses the "whore/madonna" complex from which Dearborn argues Indian women have suffered. Fleur has suffered from Eli's betrayal but she is able to overcome this, and acts as a metaphor for forgiveness and hope on a cultural level. After all, Fleur is described as the "funnel" or "hinge" to Chippewa culture. As is typical with Erdrich, meditations on gender and cultural identity become synonymous. Fleur cannot survive without her heritage, and the old Chippewa traditions cannot survive without Fleur. The inter-relationship between Fleur's survival and the tribes survival becomes manifest in the developing and continuing relationship between Fleur, Eli and Lulu.

The source of their love, its "origin" as in all cases, (if we believe in its existence) is always elusive, and yet for those experiencing it, it is physically and psychologically real. Thus, like the unreliability of Pauline's narrative, like the ontological belief in the lake monster, the love between Fleur and Eli is a site of irreducibility. It is precisely in this state of irreducibility that its power lies. It cannot be named or located, therefore it becomes almost impossible to destroy, as Pauline

comes to realise when she uses the love medicine on Eli and Sophie. With the character of Fleur, Erdrich recovers a feminine and maternal dignity which is powerful, frightening, irresistible, enigmatic and vital. All this is even more perplexing since Fleur remains silent - she is refused a narrative voice throughout this novel and others in which she appears. She refuses to resolve the mysteries surrounding her long life, such as her ability to survive drowning, and never reveals the identity of Lulu's father. It is also true that she is not responsible for some of the events for which she is given credit. The death of Napoleon is clearly Pauline's doing, but as her legend grows, Fleur is held responsible. Knowledge of this makes one wonder if other allegations are true: is Fleur responsible for the fee Agent who ends up gambling with ghosts (T 9)? In this possibility lies her power. Because of her silence, Fleur becomes witness to the survival and continuance of tribal myths.

It must be noted that the "gossip" of Pauline Puyat is behind some of the stories relating to the identity of Lulu's father (the rape in Argus and Fleur's relationship with Misshepesu), and her reliability is deliberately ambivalent. The boundaries between fact and fiction, truth and lie remain unclear. Knowledge in this instance is Fleur's alone and in this space she becomes part of a living legend. A mystical, even mythical identity develops without recourse to ontological certainties since there exists no reliable "truth". Thus when strange things happen on the reservation Fleur's supernatural / shamanic powers are often cited as the source. When Boy Lazzare dies, is it due to infection in a bite Margaret Kashpaw gave him? Or, can Fleur "kill an enemy from miles away"? Similarly in *The Bingo Palace*, when Lipsha returns to the reservation and the presence of a bear is referred to, should we consider this to be the spirit of Fleur metamorphosed? Is Fleur's seemingly eternal existence a testimony to the completion of the "Sacred Hoop" concept confirming the cyclical nature of Native American perspectives on time and narrative structure?

So who can we say is Lulu's father? Dutch? Tor? Lily? Misshepesu? Eli? This question remains tantalisingly unanswered. However, more importantly for Lulu's survival and the survival of the tribe, Nanapush - the namesake of the Chippewa culture hero - is her father figure, and her spiritual guiding force. Like him she returns from mission schooling back to the woods, forgetting all her Catholic prayers. (T 33)

The only person on whom Fleur depends, indeed owes her life to, is Nanapush. After the death of their own families, Nanapush and Fleur establish a father - daughter relationship. They create a new family unit, not based on bloodlines but on a common commitment to Chippewa survival and resistance to Western hegemony. Nanapush recalls that "Your mother (Fleur) both clung to and resisted me, like any daughter. Like you (Lulu) are doing now." (T 33), establishing new kinship bonds and continuing the collective existence of this Chippewa band. Therefore due to this bond of trust, when Lulu is born, Nanapush accepts legal responsibility when his name goes on the birth certificate. By taking responsibility for naming Lulu, Nanapush incurs specific cultural and legal responsibilities.

There were so many tales, so many possibilities, so many lies.
The waters were so muddy I thought I'd give them another stir.
"Nanapush", I said. "And her name is Lulu". (T 61)
(*Lulu after his own daughter*)

Nanapush is a father to Lulu in every way but biologically. The legal implication I will consider below, but the cultural implication I will consider presently.

In Ojibwa tradition, according to Hallowell: "A child is always given a name by an old man, i.e. a terminological grandfather. It is a matter of

indifference whether he is a blood relative or not".¹⁷ Therefore, at this very basic level, Nanapush is engaging with and continuing a specific Chippewa tradition. (The fact that this is also for the benefit of a birth certificate completed by the priest, Father Damien, is part of the legal implication which I will refer to in due course.) However, Hallowell also indicates that in Ojibwa (Chippewa) tradition the term "grandfathers" has reference to spiritual beings - perhaps equivalent to spiritual guardians - who "are sources of power to human beings through the 'blessings' they bestow, i.e., a showing of their power which enhances the 'power' of human beings".¹⁸ Although this is not directly referred to in Erdrich's novel, the fact that the name Nanapush suggests the trickster / culture hero¹⁹ of Chippewa creation stories acknowledges the cultural and spiritual importance of names and naming. At the very beginning of her life, therefore, Lulu embodies the hopes for the continuance and survival of the Chippewa band (and the Nanapush and Pillager names specifically). Nanapush's role as father or grandfather continues throughout the novel, not just because his narrative is directed to her personally, but because he continues to be a guiding and life giving force.

Many times in my life, as my children were born, I wondered what it was like to be a woman, able to invent a human from the extra materials of her own body. In the terrible times, the evils I do not speak of, when the earth swallowed back all it had given me to love, I gave birth in loss. I was like a woman in my suffering, but my children were all delivered into death. It was contrary, backward, but now I had a chance to put things into a proper order. (T 167)

In a space between life and death, eradication and survival, Nanapush recalls the loss of his family at a point where he is called to save Lulu

¹⁷ A. Irving Hallowell, "Ojibwa World View" *The North American Indians: A Sourcebook*. Eds. Owen, Deetz and Fisher. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), p. 211.

¹⁸ A. Irving Hallowell, "Ojibwa World View" *The North American Indians: A Sourcebook*. Eds. Owen, Deetz and Fisher. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), p.211.

both from death, and from Western medical practice which will amputate her frost-bitten feet. According to Nanapush death and amputation are one and the same for Lulu. He sets about reviving Lulu, using the "old ways": "I talked on and on until you lost yourself inside the flow of it, until you entered the swell and ebb and did not sink but were sustained" (T 167). The recuperation of the oral tradition, at this point, becomes synonymous with Lulu's survival. This episode is similar to the occasion when Nanapush saves himself and Fleur by telling stories to resist the death call from other spirits:

We had gone half windigo. I learned later that this was common, that there were many of our people who died in this manner, of the invisible sickness. There were those who could not swallow another bite of food because the names of their dead anchored their tongues. There were those who let their blood stop, who took the road west after all. (T 6)

Nanapush is a believer in the old ways, in the spiritual and healing power of tribal narratives and storytelling. By giving him a powerful and persuasive narrative voice in the novel, Erdrich endorses the style and structure of the Native American oral tradition with its "magical" or "mythical" truths over the hegemony of the purely referential sustained by classic realist (Western) texts.

It would be premature to suggest that Chippewa culture - in the voice of Nanapush - has displaced the authoritative and hegemonic tendency of Western culture which is manifest in a most bizarre and extreme sense in Pauline Puyat's narrative and her brand of Catholicism. In this novel it would be an act of wilful falsification if the reader tried to impose one voice, tradition, or epistemological system over the other; even if the

¹⁹ For further reading on Chippewa creation stories see Christopher Vecsey, *Traditional Ojibwa Religion and Its Historical Changes*. (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1983); and Gerald Vizenor, *The People Named The Chippewa*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

main protagonists, Pauline and Fleur, whose agendas are antithetical, desire this to happen. Indeed the path to mutually beneficial co-existence is fraught with difficulties as the often tense relationship between Fleur and Pauline reflects.

The relationship which develops between Fleur and Pauline is one which undergoes considerable change. Both suffer in different ways because of their gender and cultural heritage. Pauline suffers a mental breakdown due to religious fanaticism and the denial of her own sexuality. Fleur, on the other hand, becomes powerless to halt the "progress" of western culture and capitalism when she fails to stop the lumber company buying the land and flattening the forest. Both women suffer loss because of their inability to compromise, or effectively mediate, their own system of beliefs with the other, and the novel finishes leaving them in isolation.

However, one of the lasting impressions is of compromise and compassion in the form of a real mother-child bond between Pauline and Fleur. Unfortunately this ends in tragedy with the death of Fleur's premature son, but it is significant that the narrative resists apportioning blame and reaching a single conclusion. Like the identity of Lulu's father, the exact reason(s) behind this tragic event are undisclosed. When Pauline begins taking her vocation "seriously", she stops washing, wears her shoes on the wrong feet, grows her toenails painfully long, and puts pins in her headscarf; it is Fleur alone who allows her inside her house and forces her to wash. "I gave myself up then, closed my eyes and decided not to question Fleur's habit of sudden tenderness. It was like the night she carried me to Fritzic's closet and lay me among the ledgers" (*T* 154). As Pauline becomes childlike again, Fleur in the role of mother shows a kindness she may not deserve. Whether it was Fleur's own exertion in washing Pauline, or Pauline's refusal to clean herself on religious grounds, or simply the will of nature, at this point in the narrative Fleur loses her second child. "I (Pauline) saw the blood first, a

small brilliant patch where she'd dropped the metal tub after emptying it in the yard" (T 155). Who is to blame? Was it Pauline's religious zeal, or her inability to find the herbs Fleur needed to prevent miscarriage? Is the truth more fundamental? Is Fleur's miscarriage a sign of her inability to sustain control over her own body, her own child's life, and by association the physical and spiritual continuance of her tribe?

The latter conclusion might be supported by the journey which Pauline describes. According to Pauline, Fleur takes Pauline with her onto the road of the dead, and eventually they meet Dutch, Tor, and Lily playing cards. Pauline remembers:

In the heaven of the Chippewa there is gambling with spears of wood and rounded stones. There is gambling with deer knuckles, small brown bones, cards, dice, and human teeth. (T 160)

Inevitably Fleur gambles with them, but instead of gambling for money to pay land tax (as was the case in Argus) she is gambling for the lives of her children. She loses the first round, and an old woman takes her son from her arms (T 161). But, when Lily places Lulu's shoes on the table, and produces a lock of her hair, she knows she must play to win - and she does (T 162). Gambling for Chippewa land and her children are therefore closely linked, establishing the importance of land as well as kin to the continuance of Chippewa culture. John Purdy acknowledges that:

Even in the land of the dead, she (Fleur) is not powerless, it seems, to circumvent the plans of the pioneers. However, her inability to save her newly born child shakes Fleur's confidence. In the ensuing power plays within the community, she 'loses' her land as well; the lumberjacks continue to encircle and encroach upon the lake that is her centre.²⁰

²⁰ John Purdy, "Betting on the Future: Gambling Against Colonialism In The Novels of Louise Erdrich" in *Women in Native American Literature and Culture*. Eds. Castillo and Da Rosa. (Porto: Fernando Pessoa University Press, 1997) p.43. Purdy writes on the tradition of gambling in Native communities with respect to Erdrich's novels.

Fleur's partial success in saving Lulu, must be balanced by the fact that at this point, in the "living" world (as opposed to the "land of the dead" as Purdy describes) it is Nanapush's faith in the "old ways" which aids Lulu's survival. This further emphasises the importance of Nanapush as her father-figure and spiritual guide. (It must also be noted, as I will develop in more detail shortly, that Nanapush survives through compromise with the West and not unnegotiable resistance.)

However the relationship between Fleur and Pauline, which begins with maternal kindness in Argus and ends in disaster and death on the reservation, is perhaps an allusion to the effects of the unmediated collision of two very different cultural paradigms. Thus, the impossibility of an uncompromised co-existence between two very different cultural paradigms is perhaps nowhere better illustrated, than through the rather unique relationship between these two women and their respective maternal experiences (discussed above). As Fleur's miscarriage could signify, faith in, or a desire for, the "origin" or the "truth" necessary for any foundationalist epistemology which wishes to dominate another, is itself a destructive and alienating force.

The narrative structure, however, seems to perpetuate oppositional dichotomies as it switches to and from Nanapush's Chippewa perspective and Pauline's mystical brand of Catholicism. Brehm writes:

The physical, mythic, and verbal contests between Nanapush and Pauline in *Tracks*, are fights for who will control the cultural power....With Pauline's defeat and withdrawal behind dualistic Europeanised spirituality, Nanapush as trickster ensures that his people's power (Micipijiu), and culture (Fleur), and life (Lulu), will continue. Nanapush wins the contest for control of language and thus determines cultural destiny so that

opportunity to make use of Micipijiu's power is available to Lulu and her descendants.²¹

To a certain extent this is true, but it must be stressed that Nanapush more than any other character realises that the perpetuation of oppositional dichotomies is in fact the perpetuation of Western dualism, the same trends which contributed to the hegemony of the West since colonisation. Nanapush having witnessed this first-hand realises that oppositional tactics are useless if a culture of exclusion and conflict (which have already proved fatal in the novel if we consider Fleur's miscarriage) are to be avoided. Transgressing boundaries of culture in Nanapush's case is matched by the imaginative transgression of gender boundaries. When he saves Lulu he imagines he becomes a woman. Figuratively he crosses gender boundaries, associating himself with the maternal identity as he does so: "Many times in my life, as my children were born, I wondered what it was like to be a woman..." (T 167, quoted above). With this parallel it is clear that in Erdrich's work cultural identity and gender identity are subject to the same rigorous redefinition and relocation. In terms of cultural identity and cultural origins Stuart Hall argues:

(C)ultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture....It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return....It has its histories - and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual "past", since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always already "after the break". It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth.²²

Compromise achieved by transgressing the boundaries between Western and Chippewa traditions is essential for Chippewa survival. Nanapush finds that he must engage with bureaucracy if Lulu is ever to return to

²¹ Victoria Brehm, "The Metamorphosis of an Ojibwa *Manido*", *American Literature* 68:4 (1996): 677-706, p.695.

traditional life from the mission school to which her mother was forced to send her in the interests of her safety. Ultimately, it is in his compromise with Father Damien by signing the birth certificate, that Nanapush has the legal power to bring Lulu back. This time Nanapush cannot rely on his spiritual knowledge or experience to "save" Lulu as was his function previously (i.e. when he heals her frost-bitten feet) but rather he relies on legal loopholes.²³

Margaret and Father Damien begged and threatened the government, but once the bureaucrats sink their barbed pens into the lives of Indians, the paper starts flying, a blizzard of legal forms, a waste of ink by the gallon, a correspondence to which there is no end or reason.....To become a bureaucrat myself was the only way that I could wade through the letters, the reports, the only place where I could find a ledge to kneel on, to reach through the loophole and draw you home. Against all the gossip, the pursed lips, the laughter, I produced papers from the church records to prove I was your father, the one who had the right to say where you went to school and that you should come home. (T 225)

Nanapush perceives the continuance of the tribe not in dialectical terms - which has already proved impossible if we consider Pauline and Fleur's relationship as representative of this kind of historical progress - but rather in a dialogic sense where contact with Western traditions must be accepted if the destructive forces of binary opposition are to be neutralised. This non oppositional strategy is reflected in the narrative structure despite the apparently antithetical narrative voices of Nanapush and Pauline. As Rainwater suggests, "an hermeneutical impasse confronts the reader as he or she attempts to follow diverse interpretive avenues which refuse to converge at a cross roads. With several avenues of

²² Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" *Colonial Discourse and Post Colonial Theory*. Eds. Williams and Chrisman. (1993. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994).

²³ See Sidner Larson, "Fragmentation of Tribal People in Erdrich's *Tracks*" *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 17:2 (1993): 1-13, particularly for issues dealing with the application of the legal system by the U.S. agencies affecting Native American land rights. Consistent with the arguments I have put forward Larson notes that "In *Tracks*, however, the central image of earth, or loss of earth, proves to be only a vehicle for Erdrich's larger discussion of self, family, community and place, a discussion that widens in *Love Medicine*."(p.12)

meaning remaining open, the text does not overdetermine one interpretation and thus endorse one teleological view over the other."²⁴

Erdrich does not reveal the truth of Misshepeshu's power which anchors Chippewa tribal identity in this novel. Similarly, Pauline's religious beliefs are not easily situated in a purely Catholic or Christian doctrine. Therefore, if culture and cultural identity does not have a "fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return," then the "truth" - the original story - must remain elusive. For Erdrich's characters there is a need to believe in Misshepeshu's power, even if it has undergone substantial changes. Lulu and Lipsha, when discussing Misshepeshu's feast day in *The Bingo Palace*, have a need to believe that he is her father - whether it is true or not - because it verifies his existence, and in the late twentieth century validates a much needed sense of tribal unity.

If we consider Velie's argument,²⁵ which stresses the importance of the "supernatural" in Erdrich's fiction when determining generic categories, *Tracks*, since it is obviously the most rooted in Chippewa epistemology, becomes the most magic realist. Like *The Beet Queen* - which Velie describes as Erdrich's most "realist" text - the social, economic and cultural landscape of reservation life is rendered quite accurately: paying taxes on the land, the eventual loss of the land, and having to use bureaucratic means to reunite Lulu with her family are some examples.²⁶ Despite supernatural events, the reader never loses sight of the real, lived, tribal experience. Therefore, in the last instance *Tracks* resists closure because it refuses to settle on any single world view: not on the "magic" of Chippewa spirituality, nor on the referentiality of the realist

²⁴ Catherine Rainwater, "Reading Between Two Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich", *American Literature* 62:3 (1990): 405-422, p.410.

²⁵ See Alan Velie, "Magical Realism and Ethnicity: The Fantastic In The Fiction of Louise Erdrich" *Women in Native American Literature and Culture*. Eds. Castillo and Da Rosa. (Porto: Fernando Pessoa University Press, 1997).

²⁶ On the social and economic conditions faced by past and present Native American tribes see Sidner Larson, "Fragmentation of Tribal People in Erdrich's *Tracks*", *American Indian Culture and Research*

tradition - manifest in Erdrich's references to tribal land rights, the influence of Catholicism and capitalism, the introduction of smallpox from the West, and long famines which the Chippewas in particular endured. Despite the focus of the novel the social and economic considerations extend to the Native American community generally.

Equally important when considering the mediation of different cultural paradigms is to analyse *how* the narrators compose their narratives - how they tell their stories. By incorporating the oral tradition in the written narrative Erdrich synthesises two very different narrative forms, asking us to rethink the idea of story. In tribal tradition stories are not merely for entertainment or instruction. Rather, as Sergi suggests:

Without stories there is no articulation of experience: people would be unable to understand and celebrate the experiences of self, community, and world. And so cultures value the tellers of stories. The storyteller takes what he or she tells from experience - his of her own or that reported by others - and in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to the tale. The storyteller relies on memory (his or hers and his or her listener's) and creates a chain of tradition that passes on a happening from generation to generation.²⁷

Although Sergi is referring to storytelling and its cultural importance in general terms, it is a fairly accurate description of Nanapush who admits:

Talk is an old man's last vice.....I shouldn't have been caused to live so long, shown so much death, had to squeeze so many stories in the corner of my brain. They'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. (T 46)

Journal 17:2 (1993): 1-13; and Vine Deloria Jr., *God Is Red*. (New York: Dell, 1973), and *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. (1969. London: The Macmillan Company, 1970).

Nanapush underestimates his own value. By passing on his stories to Lulu, Chippewa history and myths which are generated and developed through the generations survive. Nanapush has his listener, albeit a reluctant one at times: "Your mother always showed the proper respect to me. Even when I bored her, she made a good effort at pretending some interest." (T 178). The effect these stories have on Lulu is extensive, and in *Love Medicine* she becomes a committed member of AIM and an expert on tribal affairs - legal and cultural - in short, the cornerstone of cultural continuance. The power of stories is great indeed, particularly as I mentioned above, in *The Bingo Palace* where the issue of Lulu's genealogical origins, and the necessary cultural paradigms this questions, provides a much needed sense of tribal unity.

By creating an active listener in Lulu, who can be seen to benefit herself and others from the stories passed down by Nanapush, Erdrich acknowledges her respect for the tribal oral tradition. By using the novel form to encapsulate this structural influence, like Nanapush, Erdrich acknowledges the power of the written word as the two traditions seamlessly interact.

One final word on this topic must be with respect to Pauline's narrative. Unlike Nanapush, Pauline has no obvious listener, which is perhaps symptomatic of two things. Firstly, Pauline makes a conscious decision to reject the collective identity of the tribe, preferring the Western perspective on identity which stresses the aspiration towards total individuation. Perhaps, as is the case with her will to martyrdom, she succeeds too well. Secondly, Pauline is a "breed" and finds it increasingly difficult to reconcile her mixed cultural heritage: "We were mixed-bloods, skimmers in the clan for which the name is lost." (T 14).²⁸

²⁷ Jennifer Sergi, "Storytelling: Tradition and Preservation in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*" *World Literature Today* 66:2 (1992): 279-282, p.279. Sergi paraphrases some of Walter Benjamin's writing in *Illuminations*. (New York: Brace and World, 1955).

²⁸ Larson points out that "This is a classic dilemma of the mixed blood, people living between culturesrepresenting all the pain, rage, and frustration of a person forced to live in two different cultures

Pauline has no family and gives up her daughter: To whom would her story be told? It is not until the later years of *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*, specifically with Albertine Johnson, that dual cultural identity is articulated more constructively.

Ultimately the narrative strategy of *Tracks* is to resist closure, thus preventing cultural hegemony. The narrative refuses to reconcile in any coherent way Pauline's dual heritage; it insists that despite Fleur's spiritual power, the survival of Chippewa culture depends, not on resistance, but on a continuing process of exchange, accommodation and transformation inherent in Nanapush's narrative. The narrative also highlights the problems manifest in the representation of women - particularly the maternal figure - from both Chippewa and Catholic backgrounds. Thus the narrative re-thinks the traditional Western generic categories which depend on only one teleological perspective to elicit the fictional "truth" or truth-effect.

To reiterate and conclude, the mysteries surrounding Fleur's pregnancy will never be resolved, and similarly fixed cultural origins will remain elusive. The past, history, knowledge, and truth are stories which never quite manage to crystallise into a pure "untainted" essence. The stories are told and retold from different perspectives and for different reasons, and will be told again in *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*. "(F)or Nanapush and the Native Americans, the last word must be survival. His stories preserve and pass along, tracing and trying to make sense of a living history."²⁹ Thus, nearly a century later, the existence of the tribe's faith in Fleur Pillager and faith in their Chippewa heritage is assured since, as the quasi-omniscient narrator of *The Bingo Palace* states, "Rumor is there's no limit to her life." (*TBP* 128).

while being rejected to a large degree by both." "Fragmentation of a Tribal people in Erdrich's *Tracks*" *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 17:2 (1993): 1-13, p. 9/10.

²⁹ Jennifer Sergi, "Storytelling: Tradition and Preservation in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*", *World Literature Today* 66:2 (1992): 279-282, p.282.

Conclusion

After such a sustained analysis of the complex nature of cultural identity and cultural mediation in terms of theme and form in Erdrich's tetralogy - *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks* and *The Bingo Palace* - I feel that it is important to offer a few words on the role and responsibility of the critic. Literary criticism at its most tenacious develops from the notion that one can explain and verify what the author 'really means'. This kind of critical metanarrative becomes politically and ideologically problematic when the critic of one culture presides over the literature of another; this is an issue I engage with, due to the fact that I am a non-Native critic of Native literature, but is a stance I mean to avoid. I could try to argue the similarities between Erdrich and myself (after reading transcripts of interviews with Erdrich there are perhaps more than I had initially realised) but by legitimating my critical analysis through this essentialist paradigm I am precluded, by my own argument, from forming any helpful or incisive analysis of writers with whom I have no common experience. Krupat carefully outlines this problematic:

The critical world today, like the world in which people work and love and die, has changed; it is very much a place of 'us' and 'them'. In our current "age of [bad] experiences", we know it is not possible to proceed without some reference to one's own "positionality" or "social location": the instantiation of personal bona fides as being one of "us", the offer of apologetic admission for being one of "them". To write criticism of ethnic or "minority" literatures today (to write anything at all!) without an awareness of the many significant issues gathered under the little words "us" and "them" is to write (as Canon Kingsely said of Cardinal Newman) as either a knave or a fool; and one would, of course, prefer to be neither.¹

Like Krupat, I too, prefer to be neither, but the question of critical responsibility and validity remains to be reconciled across cultures if the divisive and limiting tendencies of essentialist interpretative strategies are to be avoided. Critical, social and cultural distance, with an implied

¹ Arnold Krupat, *The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism and Culture*. (1996, Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), p.2.

sense of objectivity, is sometimes offered as the 'upside' of experiential difference. In the introduction to her own essay, "In Other Words: Native American Women's Autobiography", Helen Carr voices precisely this situation: "As an Englishwoman writing about Native American women's autobiography, I am at a double remove from my subject; yet I hope that remove may have its advantages. There is a sense in which it is easier - perhaps deceptively so - for the colonizing nations to grasp one another's dubious imperial histories rather than their own."² Interestingly, Erdrich, in an interview with Laura Coltelli, echoes similar sentiments by suggesting Europeans may have less prejudice against American Indians than fellow Americans.³ Perhaps distance does imply objectivity - it is an attractive argument - but I feel uncomfortable endorsing *any* interpretative or critical hierarchy. Indeed, the focus of this thesis is to emphasise the importance of carefully negotiating the epistemological variants in Erdrich's fiction in order to avoid interpretative hierarchies; to endorse a critical hierarchical or culturally authoritative stance would be a gross inconsistency.

Ultimately, I would have my work considered as part of the debate which attempts to deconstruct some limitations in literary criticism and posit a more 'hybrid' form of criticism which appreciates cultural positioning but does not let it dictate interpretative methodology or critical analysis. My critical intent is to ask similar questions of Erdrich's work, as outlined in Bergland's theoretical interrogation:

² Helen Carr, "In Other Words: Native American Women's Autobiography", *Life / Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*. Eds. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p.131.

³ LC: What about the European approach toward American Indian literature?
Erdrich: I suppose I don't really know... There are people who really write out of the tradition, who really are fascinating writers. There is that romanticizing aspect too, at least I am familiar with some German's attitude toward American Indian literature, but I think the distance between American Indians and Europeans is another factor, because people who live near Indians have the worst kind of Prejudice - people who are competing for the same land. Probably there is less prejudice in Europe towards American Indians. I think that's how Indians feel in general; there is just less prejudice.

Allan Chavkin and Nancy Chavkin (Eds.), *Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris*. (1994, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997) p.27.

(T)he battle over multiculturalism signifies a 'crisis of authority'. Whose country is it? Whose view of history? Whose view of history and truth will be heard? Ethnic and feminist studies, as well as poststructuralist scholarship, have questioned the authority of traditions that justify the domination of some groups for the profit of others and of traditions that remained sexist, racist, elitist. Thus, at issue in these debates remain questions of history, truth and memory: what stories get told? whose truth is heard? which memories find legitimacy?⁴

Thus, my aim, if I must have one, is to question and analyse the constituents of cultural mediation, and the limitations and (perhaps unconscious hierarchical) implications of generic classification. Therefore, although critical identity is important, it is not defining, and the literary critical canon can only gain, not lose, from sensitive cross-cultural analysis.

⁴ Betty Ann Bergland, "Representing Ethnicity in Autobiography: Narratives of Opposition" *The Yearbook Of English Studies* 24 (1994), p.69.

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