The Native American Experience in Contemporary U.S. Literature

——Three Novels by Louise Erdrich——

by *Teresa Bruner Cox*

In recent years a number of ethnic American writers—Native Americans, Afro-Americans, Chicanos, and Americans of Asian descent—have gained both popular and critical acclaim for literary works dealing with historical and modern experiences of minority groups in the United States. These works often concern the individual's search for identity and a sense of personal worth in a world of clashing cultures and values. Myth, magic, and mysticism frequently play a major role in the stories. Many contemporary ethnic writers also draw heavily on tradition and oral history. They have much to say about American life from a viewpoint which differs somewhat from the experiences of the mainstream of white American society.

In this paper I would like to introduce three novels by Louise Erdrich, a young writer whose works are deeply rooted in her Native American heritage and in family and tribal history. Ms. Erdrich was born in Minnesota in 1954 and was raised in North Dakota, where her parents taught at a government boarding school for American Indians. She claims membership in the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians through her mother; her father is of German descent. She studied at Dartmouth and Johns Hopkins University before working as editor of the Boston Indian Council newspaper, and as a writer-in-residence at Dartmouth. She has five children and currently lives in New Hampshire. Her husband, Michæl Dorris, is also a writer.

Ms. Erdrich's short stories have been published in *The Atalantic Monthly, Ms.* magazine, *Mother Jones, Chicago* magazine, and *The Paris Review.* She also writes pœtry; a collection entitled *Jacklight* was published in 1984. Her first novel, *Love Medicine,* appeared in 1984 and won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, the Los Angeles Times' Award for Best Novel of the Year for 1985, and

several other awards. This success was followed by *The Beet Queen* in 1986 and *Tracks* in 1988. All three novels (a fourth in the cycle is in progress) take place on or near an Indian reservation in the North Plains area of the United States, and deal with the culture clash of old and new, the struggle of individuals and a people to endure, personal searches for identity and self-worth, and the complex interrelationships between family and tribal members. The same characters—members of the Pillager, Kashpaw, and Lamartine families, the dubious Morrisseys and Lazarres, and their many relatives and descendants, reappear in the different books at different times in their lives. The cycle together forms a rich mosaic of tribal and clan history of a small band of Chippewas from the beginning of the twentieth century until the present day.

Much of the material in Erdrich's novels appears to have been modeled on genuine experiences of people she knew or heard about through family or tribal oral history. In the acknowledgement to her novel *Tracks,* she thanks her mother: "I still hear your stories of reservation and bush life"; and her great uncle, "a trapper and storyteller." However, the trials and crises of Ms. Erdrich's characters are not exclusive to Native Americans; their experiences mirror the human condition.

Tracks is Erdrich's most recent novel, and the one which deals most directly with Native American traditional culture and the transition to the modern world. *Tracks* goes back farther in time than the other novels, tracing the footsteps of a people during the desperate years of 1912 to 1924 when the members of a small band of Chippewa Indians were struggling for their very existence through epidemics and a succession of starving winters. At the same time, loggers and property speculators were trying to wrest control of the reservation lands from the impoverished Indian owners. It was a fateful time of transition for this Native American community, a time when children were gradually being sent away from their families for education in the government-run boarding schools, a time when the old ways seemed to be dying. But the forces of myth and the spirit world were still seen to exert a strong influence on peoples lives, to the extent that traditional explanations were sought for the calamities which struck the tribe: "They say the unrest and curse of trouble that struck our people in the years that followed was the doing of dissatisfied spirits." (*Tracks,* p. 4)

The old hunter Nanapush, one of the two narrators of *Tracks,* tries later to explain to his adopted daughter Lulu how dramatically the world of his people had

changed:

> "My own family was wiped out [by the epidemic] one by one .... although I had lived no more than fifty winters, I was considered to be an old man. In the years I'd passed, I saw more change than in a hundred upon a hundred before.
>
> "My girl, I saw the passing of times you will never know. I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver....I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake. I axed the last birch that was older than I, and I saved the last Pillager." (*Tracks,* p. 2)

The Pillager he refers to is seventeen year old Fleur Pillager, heroine of the novel, who like Nanapush was the only one of her family to survive the epidemic of consumption that decimated their tribe in the winter of 1912. Pauline Puyat, the second narrator of *Tracks,* and similar in age to Fleur, is also such an orphan.

The story of *Tracks* unfolds from this killing winter through several others equally cruel, and recounts a series of dramatic events linking the lives of Nanapush, Fleur, her lover Eli Kashpaw, his brother Nector and their mother Margaret (who eventually partners with Nanapush), and the plain but devious Pauline, who functions as the antithesis to Fleur. Whereas Fleur is a wild but noble creature with a close relationship to nature and the traditional Indian spirit world, Pauline comes to represent the alien force to the white world through her denial of her Indian blood and her opportunistic and somewhat warped conversion to Christianity.

These main chracters and the members of the tribe struggle against the onslaughts of nature and of forces from outside the reservation, and take actions which will continue to affect the lives of the tribe and individual family members when we meet them later in *The Beet Queen* and *Love Medicine.* In fact, *Tracks* reaches back into the past to dredge up ancestral myths, the sources of tribal and family feuds, and the conflicts and decisions which have shaped, for better or for worse, the lives of the generations which follow.

The plot of *Tracks* revolves around Fleur Pillager, a proud and wildly beautiful yet frightening figure who seems to possess magical powers which she may unleash for good or for evil. She is described as a woman who had the power to walk "without leaving tracks," (*Tracks,* p. 215) a reference to the local belief that she was

possessed by spirits, but also an allusion to the unfettered freedom of her soul. Even before Fleur's miraculous survival of the epidemic and the resulting mental dislocation which followed, members of the tribe believed that she had dangerous supernatural connections. Twice in childhood she was saved from drowning in Matchimanito Lake, where the woods were "inhabited by ghosts" (*Tracks,* p. 2) and where the lake monster Misshepeshu lived (*Tracks,* p. 8). On both occasions, Fleur's rescuers died mysteriously soon afterwards, apparently taking her place in the world beyond. It is implied several times in the story that Fleur has some special relationship with the lake spirit: "Nobody dared court her because it was clear that Misshepeshu, the water man, the monster, wanted her for himself. He's a devil, that one..." (*Tracks,* p. 11)

Fleur's special powers may also have been a family trait of "Pillagers, who knew the secret ways to cure or kill." (*Tracks,* p. 2) Her cousin Moses, another orphan of the epidemic, lives like a reclusive shaman in the woods, and members of the tribe consult him for magic spells and love potions. Both Fleur and Moses are described as possessing the potentially fatal "Pillager smile" with which they may inflict harm on enemies, and there are several instances in the story when Fleur seeks revenge or averts a threat through apparent magic or the summoning of the forces of nature in her defence.

After the epidemic, "All she had was raw power, and the names of the dead that filled her." (*Tracks,* p. 7) But as Fleur confronts greater and greater adversity, her power seems to grow. However, it never seems fully in her control, and thus can be dangerous to herself and her loved ones as well as to those who threaten her. Soon after the epidemic is over, Fleur goes to live alone in the woods, and Pauline tells us:

> "She went haywire, out of control. She messed with evil, laughed at the old women's advice and dressed like a man. She got herself into some half-forgotten medicine, studied ways we shouldn't talk about... she could see at night and went out hunting, not even in her own body. We know for sure, because... we followed the tracks of her feet and saw where they changed, where the claws sprang out..." (*Tracks,* p. 12)

Fleur then leaves the reservation to work in the nearby town of Argus, where she is abused by three whitemen with whom she works. Young Pauline is also living

there with relatives who work at the same butcher shop. As Pauline tells us, "She [Fleur] almost destroyed that town." (*Tracks,* p. 12) Immediately after the attack on Fleur, a tornado suddenly appears, and Fleur's assailants die in the freezer room where they have taken shelter. Here Pauline's recounting of the story becomes deliberately hazy, but it is apparently she, not Fleur or Pauline's cousin Russell, who locks the men in the freezer, and in the confusion after the storm they are not found for days. (This is one of several instances in Erdrich's novers where characters are killed by snow or water.) Pauline's motives for this action seem to stem more from the hate of a woman scorned for her plainness than from revenge for the cruelty of the men to Fleur. Pauline is never implicated in the deaths and never quite confesses, but her later schizophrenic actions and religious mania seem to spring in part from her guilt, partly from the deadly power she has discovered in herself.

While Fleur is a sympathetic figure who only seems to invoke the supernatural in her own defense, Pauline becomes increasingly spiteful, two-faced, and malevolent until she poisons the lives of all whom she comes in contact with. "Because she was unnoticeable, homely if it must be said, Pauline schemed to get attention by telling odd tales that created damage. There was some question if she wasn't afflicted, touched in the mind...the only people who believed Pauline's stories were the ones who loved the dirt." (*Tracks,* p. 39) Ironically, she becomes a ministrant to the ill and dying, whose spirits she feels she is gathering. "I alone...knew death as a form of grace." (*Tracks,* p. 68) There is something dangerous and unnatural in Pauline's attraction to death: "I had the merciful scavenger's heart...I became devious and holy, dangerously meek and mild." (*Tracks,* p. 69) Pauline is unable to save lives; she becomes instead a sort of angel of death with questionable motives. Fleur's second child dies in part from Pauline's destructive ministrations, and she nearly succeeds in promoting Fleur's demise as well. Those who sense the evil of Pauline's true intentions begin not to want to have her around, yet tribal custom makes it difficult to ban her from their homes: "the still look in Pauline's eyes made me wonder, so like a scavenger, a bird that lands only for its purpose." (*Tracks,* p. 189)

Pauline eventually trains to become a Catholic nun, impressing others with her intense spirituality and the harshness of her self-imposed penances. It is in order to take Catholic orders that she denies her Indian blood. By the time we meet her a-

gain as Sister Leopolda in *Love Medicine* and *The Beet Queen,* she is completely associated with the non-Indian world of the Catholic convent on the hill outside town.

After her unfortunate experiences in Argus, Fleur returns to the reservation to live alone again on her family's land by Lake Matchimanito. It seems that only in the woods, away from the modern world brought by the whites, can she be safe. "But we did know that something was wrong. The dust on the reservation stirred. Things hidden were free to walk... (*Tracks,* p. 34). Ghosts and the devil in the form of a dog are said to have appeared along the road to the lake. "But the lake monster also retreated to the deepest rocks....and no boats were lost...she kept the lake thing controlled. But she also disturbed the area around Matchimanito." *(Tracks,* p. 35) Fleur's power is not seen as stemming from malevolence, but from living alone, "a woman gone wild, striking down whatever got into her path." *(Tracks,* p. 45) In addition to the hardships of living alone in the woods, Fleur also appears to be pregnant as a result of the attack on her in Argus, although the local people imply that the child, Lulu, was fathered by the lake monster.

Fleur's loneliness is temporarily solaced by young Eli Kashpaw, an Indian as untamed as Fleur, one who "hid from authorities, never saw the inside of a classroom," and learned the old hunting ways from Nanapush (*Tracks,* p. 40). Eli comes across Fleur in the woods while on the trail of a wounded deer; Nanapush later implies that Eli was lured to her by witchcraft. The two become wildly and passionately entangled. Unfortunately, the relationship between Fleur and Eli ends in betrayal. First, Eli is enticed (or bewitched) by a jealous Pauline into seducing another woman. Soon after this, Fleur's second child, presumably fathered by Eli, dies after a premature birth during a visit by Pauline, as mentioned earlier. These defeats leave Fleur weakened before the greatest tragedy, which is yet to come. "What was happening was so ordinary that it fell beyond her abilities. She had failed too many times both to rescue us and to save her youngest child... her dreams lied, her vision was obsured, her helper slept deep in the lake...'I am tired,old uncle.'" (*Tracks,* p. 177)

In a second betrayal, Eli does not tell Fleur that his brother and mother have misappropriated the money which they had all struggled to earn to prevent the auction of their land. Nector and Margaret pay only the taxes on the Kashpaw land, and the lumber company takes over the Pillager lands around the lake, as it has bought out most of the other tribal lands. Fleur is powerless to stop this and at the

same time, in her pride, blames herself.

Fleur sacrifices the person dearest to her; she sends her daughter Lulu to the government school to protect her through the confrontation that is to come. Lulu never understands the reason for this separation, nor forgives her mother. It takes years for Nanapush to get Lulu out of the school and home again, and by that time the psychological scars are deep. (We shall see the effect on Lulu and her children when we meet them again later in *Love Medicine.*)

The forests around Lake Matchimanito are gradually cut down by the lumber company, symbolizing both the destruction of nature and of the spirit of the tribe by the whites. Nanapush's grief at Fleur's helplessness becomes an elegy for his people as well, while still leaving hope for the future:

> "Power dies, power goes under and gutters out, ungraspable. It is momentary, quick of flight and liable to deceive. As soon as you rely on its possession it is gone. Forget that it ever existed, and it returns." (*Tracks*, p. 177)

The loggers move nearer and nearer to Fleur's cabin, until the final climactic day when they and their equipment arrive at her doorstep. But of course Fleur does not give in without having her revenge, and this time what happens is clearly her own clever doing, and not the work of spirits. Fleur then leaves the clearing which had been her family's ancestral home with only a small hand-pulled cart and her most precious and symbolic possessions: a white silk scarf from Eli, a feather fan that belonged to Nanapush's wife, and Lulu's battered red patent shœs. Although Fleur is beaten in this contest, her indomitable spirit will endure and heal itself, and will once again lend its strength to others. We meet her twice again briefly in *The Beet Queen* as the exotic and eccentric itinerant pedler, still pulling a cart, who takes in Karl Adare and cures his pneumonia; and later we find her living in the woods again with the aging Eli and his half-brother Russell, who is crippled by a stroke. Fleur has apparently regained some of her power, the power to heal, and has to some extent resolved her quarrel with Eli. She also the only one with the insight to attempt to discipline the spoiled and wayward part-Indian child Dot, who is the title character in *The Beet Queen.*

The Beet Queen covers the years from the early 1930's until 1972 and takes

place in the off-reservation town of Argus, North Dakota. It is narrated by several characters in turn, so that we get different perspectives on events and relationships. Unlike *Tracks* and *Love Medicine*, most of the main characters in *The Beet Queen* are non-Indians. The story focuses on the complex and evolving relationship among three women of the roughly same age: tenacious and practical Mary Adare, abandoned at age eleven along with her older brother Karl and an unnamed newborn; her beautiful cousin Sita Kozca, whose parents own the butcher shop in Argus; and the Chippewa girl Celestine James, originally Sita's best friend who is appropriated by Mary with the same intrusive opportunism as she displays when she takes over the Kozca family business. As in Erdrich's other novels, we also meet the families and relations of these girls, and all become interconnected in a complex web. Mary's dreamy, wandering brother Karl is the father of Celestine's child Dot, and also has a homosexual relationship with a neighbor, Wallace, who later becomes Dot's doting godfather after assisting in her birth during a snowstorm. As a young woman, Mary is attracted to Celestine's half brother Russell, a brooding war hero, but is rebuffed. She never marries. Russell is more interested in the beautiful Sita, but she is too proud to consider associating with an Indian.

Mary, Sita, and Celestine continue to be closely entangled thoughout their lives. Although Celestine becomes Mary's best friend, there is a strong bond between Mary and Sita too, perhaps the attraction of opposites, or merely the familiarity bred of growing up together: "We never actually liked one another, only grew in tolerance and became accustomed to each other's presence in the way only people who sleep in the same room can. Night after night we blended and fought in dreams... So maybe I was closer to Sita than I ever was to Celestine, even though by daylight I couldn't stand Sita's careful slenderness and practiced voice." (*The Beet Queen*. p. 66)

As a child, Sita dreams only of leaving dreary Argus and the butcher shop for the bright lights and glamor of the big city, and she halfway succeeds when she goes to nearby Fargo to work as a department store sales girl and occasional model. However, to her shock, she soon discovers on a visit to Minneapolis that even Fargo is provincial and way behind the times. Sita is so proud and ambitious that she almost never finds a husband to meet her standards. Her first marriage is a disaster born of desperation. Her attempt to open a chic French restaurant in Argus with the money from her divorce is another Erdrich tragicomedy; the im-

ported chef develops food poisoning on opening night and chaos follows. At this point, Sita begins to slip into mild insanity, perhaps from seeing her youthful, romantic dreams slip away, from the unachieved "possibilities." Her second marriage, to the state food inspector, fails to halt her decline; her protective husband wastes away from an unspecified illness, and Sita at last chooses to end her own life, dressed in her best when she takes a fatal drug overdose.

Mary Adare was "so short and ordinary that it was obvious that she would be this way all her life. Her name was a square and practical as the rest of her." (*The Beet Queen,* p. 1) After being abandoned as a child, she cares for both her older brother Karl and her newborn brother, but the baby is abducted by a childless stranger, and Karl leaves Mary as soon as they arrive at their aunt's in Argus. "I was afraid. It was not that with Karl gone I had no one to protect me, but just the opposite. With no one to protect and look out for, I was weak." (*The Beet Queen.* p. 5) After arriving at her aunt's, Mary shrewdly and ruthlessly insinuates herself into the Kozcas' lives. "I planned to be essential to them all, so that they could never send me off. I did this on purpose, because I soon found out that I had nothing else to offer." (*The Beet Queen.* p. 19) Indeed, Mary never weds, and although she eventually controls Kozca's Meats, the business slowly dies after the arrival of modern supermarkets. Mary becomes a doting aunt, spoiling her niece Dot and undermining her mother's authority: "I had to wait and bide my time... Dot and I had a mental connection... I understood things about the baby that her mother could not accept." (*The Beet Queen.* p. 180) It is almost as if she wished to steal Dot as she once stole Celestine from Sita.

There are interesting parallels between the character of Mary, and of another plain girl, Pauline Puyat/Sister Leopolda in *Tracks* and *Love Medicine.* While not openly malevolent like Pauline, there is something unpleasant about Mary under the surface, something more basically unattractive than just her physical appearance. Perhaps it is her opportunism, her ability to manipulate people without qualms or hesitation. In Sita's words, "She was smart. I already knew that she was good at getting her way through pity." (*The Beet Queen.* p. 33) In Mary's own self-estimate, "I was pigheaded, bitter, moody, and had fits of unreasonable anger. Things I said came out wrong, even if I thought first." (*The Beet Queen.* p. 66) Also, like Pauline, Mary has various "supernatural" experiences; later she becomes enamored of fortune telling and occult arts, but no good ever comes of it. When she tells for-

tunes, her friends complain, "you're always telling someone they're going to die or get mangled or divorced... Why don't you ever predict something good?" (*The Beet Queen.* p. 72) After Mary's fall causes an image of Christ to appear in the ice at school, customers come to the meat shop to touch her, "holding their fingers as if my body was touched with divine electricity. I wished it was. I wished something else unusual would happen. But nothing came of their touching...There were no spectacular side affects to anything I did." (*The Beet Queen.* p. 65) Another night, when Sita has decided to leave home and go to Fargo to work, Mary's hands began to glow in the dark room "with a dead blue radiance... they pulsed brightly." Although the cause may merely have been the chemical cleaner Mary used earlier that day, Sita is terrified: "I'm so glad I'm getting out of here." (*The Beet Queen.* pp. 77-78) Sita's decision to go away and abdicate control of the family business to Mary is thus sealed.

There are other unpleasant things about Mary. She is first attracted to Celeste's brother Russell when she sees his scars from the war. When she at last receives a letter from her vanished mother, Mary writes with unforgiving cruelty, telling her anonomously that all her children are dead. Sita says that Mary's "handwriting looked like that of a witch." (*The Beet Queen.* pp. 85) But Sita herself is at times described as "witchlike and gruesome," (*The Beet Queen.* p. 120), and is not above considering her power to hurt people: "I realized that my visit could be more than dramatic anyway. It could be dangerous. I realized that I could spoil Jude Miller's future." (*The Beet Queen.* p. 92)

Like Mary, Celestine James is described as a plain but solid girl, but Celestine is also "tall but not clumsy." (*The Beet Queen.* p. 31) Her parents died when she was young and she was raised by an elder sister. When Celestine and Mary are introduced by Sita, "I could see that it was like two people meeting in a crowd, who knew each other from a long time before. And what was also odd, they looked suddenly alike. It was only when they were together. You'd never notice it when they weren't." (*The Beet Queen.* p. 32) Celestine matures quickly and then quits school to go to work. "Celestine looked good in those days, big and lean... she was handsome like a man." (*The Beet Queen.* p. 67) Unlike Mary and Sita, there is nothing at all malicious about Celestine.

When Mary's brother Karl Adare returns briefly to Argus, the manless Celestine is flattered by his attentions and becomes temporarily infatuated: "Dusk is al-

ways my time, that special air of shifting shapes, and it occurs to me that even though he says I am mot pretty, perhaps in the dusk I am impossible to resist. Perhaps there is something about me, like he says." (*The Beet Queen.* p. 126) Karl moves in with Celestine, but both her brother and Mary disapprove of the relationship, and Celestine herself soon tires of his parasitic presence: "Love wears on me. I am tired of coming home to Karl's heavy breathing and even his touch has begun to oppress me. 'Maybe we ought to end this while we're still in love,' I say to him one morning. He just looks at me." (*The Beet Queen.* p. 135) However, it is doubtful if Karl knows how to love, and the reality of life with him doesn't match Celestine's romantic fantasies. "I don't want to get married. With you around I get no sleep, I'm tired all the time... I don't have any dreams. I'm the kind of person who likes having dreams. Now I have to see you every morning when I wake up and I forget if I dreamed anything." (*The Beet Queen.* p. 136) In the end, Celestine chooses to reclaim her solitude, and she drives Karl away even though she is pregnant with his child. They marry only to legitimize the child, and Karl resumes his life as a travelling salesman and con artist.

Dot Adare, daughter of Celestine and Karl, and therefore part Indian, is the title character of *The Beet Queen.* Like her father, Dot is a central force linking the main characters of the story. Raised by her mother and spoiled by her aunt and godfather, Dot becomes increasingly remote and unreachable as she grows up. Her strong and demanding personality alienates those around her and deprives her of the friends she so desperately needs; as a child, she tries to get attention from other children by attacking them.

> "She became a bully, a demanding child, impossible to satisfy. In our hearts, as time went on, we knew that we were making a selfish girl whose first clear word was MORE. She was greedy, grew fat because we sympathised too much. We had gone hungry as children and could not deny her a morsel. (*The Beet Queen.* p. 181)

Dot grows up feeling friendless and unloved, while at the same time she is almost stifled by the unstinting love of the lonely, emotionally starved adults close to her (Mary and Wallace are single, Celestine and Karl do not live together, and Sita is essentially alone even during her two brief marriages): "They loved Dot too much, and for that sin she made them miserable." (*The Beet Queen,* p. 233)

Dot dreams of running away to join her mysterious and therefore glamorous father, or of disappearing with a grand gesture like her grandmother did when she abandoned her three children to fly off with a barnstorming pilot, "...without a backward look, without a word, with no warning and no hesitation," never to reappear. (*The Beet Queen,* p. 12) (This is apparently the only way a white woman in the modern world can escape the weight of misfortune; unlike Fleur Pillager, grandma Adelaide could not turn into a spirit creature and fly away without leaving tracks.)

Dot becomes an unlovely and friendless teenage delinquent who seems to be headed for self-destruction despite all the well-meaning affection from her elders. Most of their attempts to please Dot or enhance her social life backfire in the most disastrous ways, such as when godfather Wallace's expensive mechanical birthday cake goes out of control and wreaks total havoc at the birthday party that was supposed to help Dot make new friends. The title of *The Beet Queen,* refers to the climactic episode of the novel, where all of the main characters of the story converge. Godfather Wallace has rigged the election for queen of the town festival in Dot's favor. Unfortunately, the whole town, and eventually Dot, know of Wallace's manipulations, thus spoiling the glory of her day. Ironically, on the same day, her aunt Sita, fighting an unspecified illness and a gradually fading grip on reality, has done herself in. Rather than miss the festival and Don's coronation as Queen, Mary and Celestine drive to town and join the parade with the well-dressed but deceased Sita in the front seat of their pick-up truck. This is yet another example of the way in which Ms. Erdrich manages to combine tragedy with the most bizarre comedy, so that we are never completely overcome by the darker forces which seem to weigh down the lives of her characters.

Dot finally does get her chance to fly, when she takes a ride with a skywriting pilot after her meaningless coronation at the festival. But instead of flying away into the distance to disappear forever, Dot returns to plant her feet firmly on the ground, just as much needed rain arrives to end a long drought. The experience seems to give her a new understanding of life and a realization and acceptance of her mother's love.

> "The plane wiggles, shudders, spins over like a carnival rocket. I feel too light, unconnected. I sit up and open my mouth, shriek at him to take

me back down...

"I'm so happy to touch the ground that I don't care...home. I start walking, wobbling a little, righting myself. The platform is empty...

"It is a lonely thought, and not entirely true. For as I am standing there, I look closer into the grandstand and see that there is someone waiting. It is my mother, and all at once I cannot stop seeing her. Her skin is rough. Her whole face seems magnitized, like ore. Her deep brown eyes are circled with dark skin, but full of eagerness. In her eyes, I see the force of her love. It is bulky and hard to carry, like a package that keeps untying...It is embarrassing. I walk to her, drawn by her, unable to help myself." (*The Beet Queen,* pp. 336-337)

The novel ends on an ambiguous note, and where Dot will go from there is anybody's guess. She appears peripherally in *Love Medicine* as the hard looking wife of activist Gerry Nanapush, so perhaps she finally finds the love she has been seeking despite the hardships that go along with Gerry's perpetual incarceration.

Myth, magic, and mysticism are key forces in all of Erdrich's novels. In *Tracks.* three of the main characters (Nanapush, Fleur, and Pauline) and one peripheral character (Moses Pillager) are described as having or believing themselves to have supernatural powers, The contrast between the spiritual lives of Fleur and Pauline is of particular importance. In *The Beet Queen,* the otherwise plan and practical Mary Adare is the cause of a minor miracle at her Catholic school, and later in life becomes increasingly concerned with fortune telling and other non-Indian forms of mysticism. In contrast, her Indian friend Celestine James is the only one in the town who is not able to see the "miracle" which Mary has caused, perhaps because of her down-to-earth personality, or perhaps because her Indianness somehow insulates her from Christian spiritualism: "[I] join the throng clustered around the miraculous face. Only to me, it is not so miraculous. I stare hard at the patterns of frozen mud, the cracked ice...Other people looking from the same angle see it. I do not, although I kneel until my knees grow numb." (*The Beet Queen,* p. 43) Pauline also appears again in *The Beet Queen* and in *Love Medicine* as the aging nun Sister Leopolda, still subject to religious visions and excessive self-mortification. In *Love* Medicine, we meet Moses Pillager again as "Old Man Pillager," a backwoods shaman who still lives traditionally. Other characters—Gerry Nanapush, Moses' illegitimate son, and his son Lipsha Morrissey— are said to have inherited "the touch" from Moses. Gerry becomes an Indian rights activist and has a miraculous

ability to escape repeatedly from prison: "I knew my dad would get away. He could fly. He could strip and flee and change into shapes of swift release. Owls and bees, two-toned Ramblers, buzzards, cotton tails and motes of dust..." (*Love Medicine,* p. 266) As we shall see later, Lipsha uses his powers to heal. His mother June was found as a child wandering alone in the woods, her parentage unknown: "It was as if she really was the child of what the old people called Manitous, invisible ones who live in the woods." (*Love Medicine,* p. 65)

Like Erdrich's other stories, *Love Medicine* seems littered with abandoned, orphaned, and illegitimate children, the wreckage of passion which has run against the rocks. All of these people are especially in need of the healing power of love. But like the beautiful, perfect pies that were stacked in the kitchen and then broken in a drunken family argument, "...once they smash, there is no way to put them right." (*Love Medicine,* p. 39)

In the first chapter of *Love Medicine,* June Morrissey, once beautiful but "burned out young" (*Love Medicine,* p. 269) and now dependent on what money she can glean from brief liasons with white oil men, walks off into the night to die in an unseasonal snowstorm. Some say she was trying to walk home to the reservation; others say she knew the storm was coming and chose to end her sordid life quietly and cleanly in the woods because she had "nothing to come home to." (*Love Medicine,* p. 12) After June's death in the first chapter, the novel examines the lives and the relationships among people who are all connected in some way to June, and like her have had their lives go astray one way or another.

Lipsha, June's illegitimate son by Gerry, was raised by Grandma Kashpaw (Marie Lazarre, Nector's wife), who practices her own "love medicine" by taking in several unwanted children. Nector claims that the fact that there were always babies underfoot at home drove him to renew his affair with his teenage sweetheart, Lulu Nanapush (the daughter of Fleur Pillager), to Marie's continued pain. Lulu is a woman with a big heart, but also selfish: "I was in love with whole world and all that lived in its rainy arms...I'd open my mouth wide, my ears wide, my heart, and I'd let everything inside." (*Love Medicine,* p. 216) Lulu has eight sons by an assortment of fathers, and at one point she wins a tribal political row by threatening to name the fathers publicly and thereby embarrass both them and their wives. The relationship between Nector and Lulu continues off and on for many years, even well into old age.

Another casualty in need of love medicine is Lulu's son Henry Lamartine, a Vietnam veteran and escaped prisoner of war who "carried enough shrapnel deep inside of him, still working its way out, to set off the metal detector in the airport." (*Love Medicine.* p. 134) Henry goes back home to the reservation, but cannot escape his fearful memories of the war and has no interest in life: "By then I guess the whole war was solved in the government's eyes, but for him it would keep on going." (*Love Medicine.* p. 147) No one seems able to reach him. Henry's brother Lyman tries to help him by getting him to fix a up a beautiful old convertible which they had bought together as carefree, adventurous teenagers. But Lyman's cure fails, and when the car is completely restored, Henry is no better off than before: "I can't help it. It's no use."(*Love Medicine.* p.152) He ends his tormented life by jumping into the river, commenting dispassionately to his brother as his boots fill with water and drag him under the swift current.

June leaves behind two grown children, the illegitimate Lipsha Morrissey, who we have already mentioned, and her legal child King Kashpaw. King is the opposite of his name, a braggart and a loser who drinks too much, beats his wife, and bullies his half brother. His small son "little King" prefers to be called Howard and is terrified of his father. King has even betrayed the respected Gerry Nanapush to the police, probably out of lingering jealousy over Gerry's past affair with King's mother.

June's other son Lipsha Morrissey grows up feeling lost and unwanted, unsure of himself, not knowing who his mother and father were, and sometimes persecuted by his "cousin" (actually half-brother) King. Lipsha has been told that his mother "would have drowned" him (*Love Medicine,* p. 37) and he feels he can never forgive her. However, Lipsha does have a special quality: "Now. . .as I have to told you, I am sometimes blessed with the talent to touch the sick and heal their individual problems without knowing what they are. I have some powers which, now that I think of it, was likely came down from Old Man Pillager." (*Love Medicine,* p.248) He uses this power to help the patients in the Senior Citizen's Home, and to ease the physical and spiritual aches and pains of relations like his cousin Albertine: "Lipsha's voice was a steady bridge over a deep black space of sickness I was crossing. If I just kept listening, I knew I'd get past all right," (*Love Medicine,* p. 35)

But in one hilarious and ultimately tragic incident he also tries to help his grandmother Marie concoct a love potion (one type of "Love Medicine") of goose

heart to hold the affections of her wayward geriatric husband, Nector, who has started sneaking off together with Lulu again to the laundry room at the Senior Citizen's center. Unable to shoot two geese for the spell, Lipsha uses store-brought, frozen turkey hearts instead, and this shortcut apparently causes the medicine to go awry. Grandpa Kashpaw chokes to death on the heart, and later comes back to haunt Grandma Kashpaw because the potion was intended to keep them together.

Lipsha himself eventually finds strength by recognizing the identity of his own parents. At the end of the story, he finally has the opportunity to meet and be acknowledged at last by his father Gerry, thus gaining pride in himself: "...my father, Gerry Nanapush, famous politicking hero, dangerous armed criminal, judo expert, escape artist, charismatic member of the American Indian Movement...That was... Dad." (*Love Medicine,* p. 248) "I was a real kid now." (*Love Medicine.* p.255) Lipsha helps Gerry escape the police. We sense that Lipsha has also freed himself from the negative aspects of his family history to find a new sense of self-esteem: "To be a son of a father was like that. In that night I felt expansion, as if the world was branching out in shoots and growing faster than the eye could see...We held each others' arms, tightly and manly, when we got to the border." (*Love Medicine,* p. 271)

Lipsha is at last able to accept that his mother June may in fact have had his best interests at heart when she left him with Marie. After driving Gerry to Canada, Lipsha stops on the bridge over the boundary river. "I thought of June...she was part of the great loneliness being carried up on the driving current...I tell you, there was good in what she done for me, I know now. The son that she acknowledged [King] suffered more than Lipsha Morrissey did...I got inside. The morning was clear. A good road led on. So there was nothing to do but cross the water, and bring her home." (*Love Medicine,* pp. 271-272)

Nature is an important motif and moving force in all three of Louise Erdrich's novels. As has been pointed out by Marvin Magalaner in his essay "Of Cars, Time, and the River," water is a key motif in *Love Medicine,* and he considers air to be the ruling element in *The Beet Queen,* as illustrated by examples cited earlier in this paper. While space prohibits a detailed analysis here, I would also say that water is a very important element in *Tracks,* comsidering the constant references to Fleur's supposed relationship with the water monster of nearby Lake Machimanito and the influence on the tribes' fortunes which is attributed to that monster or spirit. In my opinion, the woods are also important; they represent the traditional Indian way of

life, nurturing and protecting those who know how to live in them, although they also hold solitude and danger. Eli Kashpaw is thought to have been able to keep his mental powers sharp well into old age because he "knew the woods, . . .while Grandpa's [Nector's] mind had left us, gone wary and wild," because he had been too much affected by the white man's ways. (*Love Medicine,* p. 17) In *The Beet Queen,* the battered war veteran Russell goes back to the reservation to live with Eli and Fleur in the woods. After Fleur is raped by whitemen in *Tracks,* she returns to the woods for safety and succor. The last great tragedy in Fleur's life is when she has to watch helplessly as the virgin Dakota woods are symbolically raped by the white lumbermen, signifying the destruction of traditional Native American culture. But she manages to endure even this ultimate violation, and to go on with her life elsewhere.

This is in fact what most of Erdrich's characters manage to do. All go through hardship, many hunger for love, but most somehow manage to survive and sometimes become stronger through their suffering. Ms. Erdrich's novels are thus a tribute to the ultimate triumph of the indomitable human spirit.

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