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Helen Jaskoski
SAIL
Department of English
California State University Fullerton
Fullerton, California 92634

Creative work should be addressed to
Joseph Bruchac, Poetry/Fiction Editor
The Greenfield Review Press
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LOVE MEDICINE: A METAPHOR FOR FORGIVENESS

Lissa Schneider

Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* has been regarded as simply a collection of short stories, lacking in novelistic unity and overriding structure.¹ Yet despite shifts in narrative style and a virtual cacophony of often individually unreliable narrative voices, Erdrich successfully weds structure and theme, style and content. For the novel is as much about the act of storytelling as it is about the individual narratives and the symbols and interrelationships which weave them together thematically. In *Love Medicine*, storytelling constitutes both theme and style. Erdrich repeatedly shows how storytelling—characters sharing their troubles or their "stories" with one another—becomes a spiritual act, a means of achieving transformation, transcendence, forgiveness. And in this often comic novel, forgiveness is the true "love medicine," bringing a sense of wholeness, despite circumstances of loss or broken connections, to those who reach for it. Moreover, the novel is in itself the stylistic embodiment of Erdrich's theme; as a series of narratives or chapters/stories shared with the reader, the work as a whole becomes a kind of "love medicine" of forgiveness and healing in its own right.

The storytelling in the novel thus functions on manifold levels. With revealing insight, Kathleen Sands has attributed the source of Erdrich's technique to "the secular anecdotal narrative process of community gossip" (14), and confirms that "ultimately it is a novel" (12), one that is "concerned as much with exploring the process of storytelling as with the story itself" (13). Sands, however, goes on to say that Erdrich's characters are unable "to give words to each other, except in rage or superficial dialogues that mask discomfort" (20), and focuses on the reader as the one who must "integrate the story into a coherent whole." She also suggests that such a reader must be "not some community member," but an "outsider" (15). This leads her to conclude that the novel "may not have the obvious spiritual power so often found in Indian fiction" (23), and in some respects underscores Nora Barry and Mary Prescott's critical assessment that "even sympathetic reviewers" tend to see Erdrich's characters as "doomed Chippewas" (123). In a more extreme vein, Louise Flavin submits that the novel's "diverse points of view" accentuate the "theme of the breakdown of relationships" and that it "suggests not tribal or family unity but separation and difference" (56), while Marvin Magalaner points to themes of "entrapment and enclosure" (105) and curiously describes the characters as "savages now forced into tameness by material progress . . ." (104). By contrast, Barry and Prescott, in a sentiment closely echoed by Elizabeth Hanson,² feel that *Love Medicine* "really celebrates Native

American survival and credits spiritual values with that survival" (123). They attribute this survival to "a character's ability to internalize both the masculine and the feminine, the past and the present" (124).

I suggest that the means by which Erdrich's characters learn to internalize and integrate past with present is through the transformative power of storytelling. A non-Native reader, or any reader, is not the sole audience to these stories, for it is the characters themselves who, within the course of the narratives, begin this recovery of stories as they move beyond gossip to share with one another intimate revelations of highly personal desires, guilts, and troubles. It is in the personal stories that the characters *tell each other* that the real spiritual force of the novel can be felt.

Stories as "love medicine," moreover, provide the alternative in the novel to the characters' struggles with experiences of alcohol abuse, religious fanaticism, or compulsive sex relations, as well as the spiritual havoc that these kinds of seductive but hollow "love medicines" wreak on human relations. But although Erdrich focuses on the Chippewa experience, the troubles her characters experience are not exclusively "Indian problems." Erdrich herself sees the novel in terms of its articulation of "the universal human struggle" (George 241), and her characters, as Bo Schöler has said of other Native literary depictions of alcohol-related themes, are motivated by "complex and ultimately profoundly human causes" (79). These are problems common to every society, and the solution she posits is relevant for both Native and non-Native cultures alike. Forgiveness in *Love Medicine* is thus of the everyday variety, that which is extended from a child to a parent, a wife to a husband, brother to brother. Moreover, for Erdrich, forgiveness is not explanation, not unconditional, not forgetting. It is the transformation that comes through the sharing and recovery of stories, and the giving up of the notion of oneself as victim.

Some of Erdrich's comments in her foreword to *The Broken Cord*—her collaborator/husband Michael Dorris's non-fictional book on their adopted child's fetal alcohol syndrome—show, moreover, that her interest in these themes is more than academic. She describes struggling with her own drinking, saying:

I drank hard in my twenties, and eventually got hepatitis. I was lucky. Beyond an occasional glass of wine, I can't tolerate liquor anymore. But from those early days, I understand the urge for alcohol, its physical pull. I had formed an emotional bond with a special configuration of chemicals, and I realize to this day the attraction of the relationship and the immense difficulty in abandoning it. (xvi-xvii)

Such an awareness accounts for the tremendous sensitivity with which she handles the many vivid drinking scenes in *Love Medicine*. She recognizes that alcohol can fill a spiritual void, that it can become a substitute for emotionally bonding with other people. Alcohol is but one of the false "love medicines" that Erdrich deconstructs in her novel, but perhaps it is the most devastating. In her forward to *The Broken Cord*, a book which is itself an example of the healing power of storytelling,³ she continues:

Tribal communities, most notably the Alkali Lake Band in Canada, are coming together, rejecting alcohol, reembracing their own humanity, their own culture. These are tough people and they teach a valuable lesson: to whatever extent we can, we must take charge of our lives (xix).

Learning to "take charge" is the dominant message in *Love Medicine*. For her characters, it cannot be done while they continue to abuse alcohol or other substitutes for true sharing.

The novel opens on Easter in 1981 with June Morrissey Kashpaw's thoughts and feelings, related in third person, as she commences upon the alcoholic binge which will lead to her death. June's death will affect all the other characters. In a radical revision of Christ's Easter resurrection, the death of this alcoholic Indian woman becomes the impetus which propels many of the other characters toward healing. In this scene, June is clearly reaching for something spiritual, something to hold on to in a life broken by divorce and disappointment. But she looks for her answers in a bar, and comes up empty. Intending to catch a noon bus for the reservation where she was raised, she stops at the invitation of a man to "tip down one or two" (1). When she enters the barroom, the narrator tells us, "What she walked toward more than anything else was that blue egg in the white hand, a beacon in the murky air" (2). Blue is the color of sky, of spirit and transcendence, signaling to her like a "beacon." But instead of the blue egg the man in the red vest peels her a pink one, thwarting her impulse and replacing it with the faded color of earth, of blood, of sexuality. When she drinks, it is "Blue Ribbon" beer and "Angel Wings" (2-3), again symbolizing a frustrated spiritual instinct, and she says to the man, "Ahhhhh, you got to be. You got to be different" (3). June seeks transformation through sex and alcohol, but the only metamorphosis they are able to bring is degradation and death.

The balance of chapter one shifts to the first person narrative of June's niece, Albertine Kashpaw, who introduces the theme of the recovery and sharing of stories. Albertine has been attending nursing school off-reservation, but returns several months after June's demise

seeking a sense of completion with a death she cannot understand. She asks herself, "But what did I know, in fact, about the thing that happened?" (9). She denies her mother's blunt assessment of it, even though we know from June's narrative that Albertine's mother is correct:

"Probably drank too much," Mama wrote. She naturally hadn't thought well of June. "Probably wandered off too intoxicated to realize about the storm."

But June grew up on the plains. Even drunk she'd have known by the heaviness in the air, the smell in the clouds. She'd have gotten that animal sinking in her bones (9).

Erdrich subverts Albertine's romantic, mythic notions about the skills of a Native American woodsman or woman. Although June, as Marie's story tells us in Chapter four, had "sucked on pine sap and grazed grass and nipped buds like a deer" (65) to stay alive as a child, she is ultimately no match for the effects of alcohol; the liquor clouds her judgement and causes her death as surely as if she had suffered the irreversible effects of alcohol poisoning. June's chemically altered perceptions had told her that "The wind was mild and wet. A Chinook wind" (6)—harbinger of good weather, not storms—and she freezes to death.

Albertine's denial of June's alcoholism may relate to her own psychic connection with June, a connection which becomes clearer in the central chapter entitled "A Bridge," where the narrative spins back to 1973. There we learn that Albertine takes a journey remarkably similar to June's own, one that, but for small differences, could have resulted in equally tragic consequences. The two journeys are contrasted in almost every detail. Albertine has taken the bus to run away from the reservation. It is another "harsh spring" (130), if not Easter then close to it, for we learn it is "not yet May" (137). Albertine also sees something which she compares to a "beacon," but unlike June, interprets this to be a "warning beacon" (130). Where the man June meets only looks familiar to her, the man Albertine sees in the bus station turns out to be Henry Lamartine Junior, another Chippewa whose family is known to her from the reservation. June wears white, the color of death in Chippewa culture, and Albertine wears black. June drinks "Angel Wings" with a man who doesn't listen to her, while Henry romantically whispers to Albertine, "Angel, where's your wings" (136). When June enters the ladies room, "All of a sudden she seemed to drift out of her clothes and skin with no help from anyone" (4); Albertine, on the other hand, feels her body "shrink and contract" while alone in the bathroom, and feels herself becoming "bitterly

small" (132). Perhaps the greatest difference between the two is that while June intends to stop drinking after "a few" but cannot, the younger Albertine still retains some control: "She had stopped after a few and let him go on drinking, talking, until he spilled too many and knew it was time to taper off" (136). Indeed it is Henry, Albertine's companion and a Vietnam vet, who dies soon after, his own drinking having crossed the line into alcoholism and self-destruction.

But in the opening chapter, Albertine only alludes to these links. She says:

I had gone through a long phase of wickedness and run away. Yet now that I was on the straight and narrow, things were even worse between [my mother and me].

After two months were gone and my classes were done, and although I still had not forgiven my mother, I decided to go home. (10)

What Erdrich shows here is that simply getting on "the straight and narrow" is not enough; that alone does not fill the spiritual void that leaves Albertine full of resentment. It is in fact only the beginning, just as Albertine's return to the reservation is only the beginning of the novel. And just as the car she drives has "a windshield wiper only on the passenger side" (10) and "the dust [hangs] thick" (11), her vision is still obscured. But once she arrives home, she initiates the recovery of stories that begins a transformation process, a process that includes those that are able to share with her.

Some of the recovery comes out of her own buried memories, memories which begin to surface as soon as she arrives at home. Her recollections of June help her to understand June's son, King:

I had adored her into telling me everything she needed to tell, and it was true, I hadn't understood the words at the time. But she hadn't counted on my memory. Those words stayed with me.

And even now, King was saying something to Lynette that had such an odd dreaming ring to it I almost heard it spoken out in June's voice.

June had said, "He used the flat of his hand. He hit me good." And now I heard her son say, "... flat of my hand ... but good ..." (16)

It is hard not to forgive someone once it becomes clear that they, like King, are only repeating behavior that they have learned. And although Erdrich will show in later chapters that this does not relieve King of responsibility for his actions, Albertine is beginning to make connections for herself.

She continues her search for the stories that are her heritage by questioning her grandfather, thinking, "I wanted him to tell me about things that happened before my time, things I'd been too young to understand. . . . What had gone on? . . . I wanted to know it all" (17-18). But her grandfather's mind "had left us, gone wary and wild" (17), so she turns to her grandmother, whom she sees as being "like an oracle on her tripod" (19), and encourages her, with her mother and her other aunt, to talk. The story of June's near-fatal childhood "hanging" comes up, now "the private trigger of special guilts" (19). But when the three older women, in a communal effort, tell the tale to Albertine, we see for the first time the healing properties of storytelling, as guilt is transformed to forgiveness and laughter: "Then they were laughing out loud in brays and whoops, sopping tears in their aprons and sleeves, waving their hands helplessly" (21). It is after these shared stories, moreover, that Zelda, Albertine's mother, affirms her daughter's membership in the community, something we sense Albertine, "a breed" (23), has long awaited: "'My girl's an *Indian*,' Zelda emphasized. 'I raised her an Indian, and that's what she is'" (23).

The remaining chapters continue this recovery of stories. Chapter two is Albertine's grandmother's girlhood story, a first person account relayed in past tense. And who, we should ask, comprises Marie's audience? If the chapter is only a vignette, and but loosely related to the novel as a whole, then the answer would be simply and solely "the reader." But we have already seen Albertine actively seeking answers, and Marie does speak in past tense; thus Marie seems to be speaking to her granddaughter. What is striking is the duality of Albertine as audience to these individual narratives, and the reader as audience to the novel as a larger, synergetic whole. Indeed, there is even the sense of the Chippewa community as audience, a sense that is further underscored toward the close of the novel when Lipsha tells his father, Gerry Nanapush, that both Marie and Lulu, Gerry's mother, have become valued in the community for their knowledge as "oldtime traditional[s]" (268) who are sought after for their stories.

Within the individual narratives, moreover, Erdrich repeatedly subverts other kinds of "love medicines," the other common "cures" for the spiritual void that is so much a part of the human condition. Just as chapter one reveals the hollowness of both alcohol and sex as alternatives, in chapter two Marie tells the story of her experience with religion and revenge, and the emptiness of both. Of her religion she says:

I was like those bush Indians who stole the holy black hat

of a Jesuit and swallowed little scraps of it to cure their fevers. But the hat itself carried small pox and was killing them with belief. (42)

The Jesuit's hat is a metaphor for all the things we think will make us feel better about ourselves, the lack that Erdrich shows can only be filled by surrendering the notion of oneself as victim, and sharing on equal terms with other people. Even when Marie comically gets the better of her insane abuser, Sister Leopolda, Marie tells her audience that the victory was empty as dust:

My heart had been about to surge from my chest with the blackness of my joyous heat. Now it dropped. I pitied her. I pitied her. Pity twisted in my stomach like that hook-pole was driven through me. I was caught. It was a feeling more terrible than any amount of boiling water and worse than being forked. Still, still, I could not help what I did. I had already smiled in a saint's mealy forgiveness. I heard myself speaking gently.

"Receive the dispensation of my sacred blood," I whispered.

But there was no heart in it. No joy when she bent to touch the floor. No dark leaping. I fell back into the white pillows. Blank dust was whirling through the light shafts. My skin was dust. Dust my lips. Dust the dirty spoons on the ends of my feet.

Rise up! I thought. Rise up and walk! There is no limit to this dust! (56)

It takes Marie over twenty years to reconcile this experience. In the chapter "Flesh and Blood" she describes taking one last trip up the convent hill, this time bringing her daughter Zelda. Still, she goes neither to forgive nor to share a story, but to brag (114), to prove to Leopolda that she has become "solid class" (113), not through any inner qualities of her own, but through what she has made of her husband and her children. Leopolda, unimpressed with this litany of accomplishments, cuts her to the quick with a reminder of her heritage as a "dirty Lazarre" (59), "the youngest daughter of a family of horse-thieving drunks" (58), a heritage Marie has spent her life trying to forget: "'So you've come up in the world,' she mocked, using my thoughts against me. 'Or your husband has, it sounds like, not you, Marie Lazarre'" (118). Through this exchange, and their ensuing battle for the spoon, Marie comes to recognize Leopolda's dual role as "antagonist" and "spiritual guide" (Barry and Prescott 128), and both forgives her, and accepts—not blindly, not unconditionally, but without recriminations—her daughter's admission of a desire to join the

convent.

This lesson prepares her, moreover, for the discovery that she could lose those very things she has just bragged of, and teaches her humility. After she finds Nector's note recounting his love for Lulu, she realizes: "I had been on my high horse. Now I was kneeling" (128). In this moment she finds the courage to accept her past, without explanation or further qualification, and she tells her listener, "I could leave off my fear of ever being a Lazarre. I could leave off my fear, even of losing Nector, since he was gone and I was able to scrub down the floor" (128). In sharing her story with her daughter and the nun, who hears and responds to her "thoughts," not her words, Marie also learns how to forgive Nector and help him home:

So I did for Nector Kashpaw what I learned from the nun.
I put my hand through what scared him. I held it out there
for him. And when he took it with all the strength of his
arms, I pulled him in. (129)

Still, in keeping with the chapter's title, it is not the forgiveness of a "saint" as Louise Flavin suggests (64), but that of a "flesh and blood" human being; it is a forgiveness that comes, after all, with the comic and lasting reminder: "salt or sugar?" (129) The novel speaks for progress, never for spiritual perfection.

Nector, Albertine's grandfather, speaks in chapter three. His passages are first person present tense, reflecting that his memory is in fact gone, so that when he speaks to Albertine, he forgets the passage of time and place, and relives it all again. In chapter one Albertine says, "Grandpa shook his head, remembering dates with no events to go with them, names without faces, things that happened out of place and time" (18).

Nector's narratives continually underscore his inability to take charge of his own life. Nothing is ever his fault; nothing is ever of his own doing. He thinks of himself as swept along by the current, as "steering something out of control" (104). When he meets Marie on the convent hill and makes love to her, first he denies that he has done it, and then he blames Marie:

"I never did!" I shout, breaking my voice. I whirl to her.
She is looking at the geese I hold in front to hide my
shame. I speak wildly.

"You made me! You forced me!"

"I made you!" She laughs and shakes her hand, letting
the pillowcase drop clear so that I can see the ugly wound.

"I didn't make you do anything," she says. (61-62)

And so goes his career, his affair with Lulu Lamartine, his destruction

of Lulu's house. He uses alcohol, sex, even sugar in comitragic efforts to transform himself: "I had to have relief," he says (93). When Nector burns Lulu's home with their son Lyman inside, all he can say is, "I have done nothing" (109). Erdrich makes a strong statement here about the high price of clinging to the role of victim, for she shows that it is at this moment that Nector's mind snaps. His daughter has followed him to Lulu's, and he mistakes her for his wife Marie, transformed into a blazing avenging angel. Although many critics seem to accept Lipsha's early assessment that Nector "put second childhood on himself" (191),⁴ Nector's own comments about his senility echo all his earlier statements: "I couldn't say no," he says (190). Nector never learns to confront his secrets.

Like Marie's and Albertine's, Lipsha's experiences with learning to forgive and take charge are a process. Lipsha's narratives describe a gradual progression through several crisis points. At the beginning of the novel, when Albertine attempts to tell him the truth about his mother, he refuses to listen, saying: "No, Albertine, you don't know what you're talking about" (36). When he tells Albertine about flying to the moon in a dream, he admits to a fear that harkens back to Nector. Lipsha says, "once I stood [on the moon] at last, I didn't dare take a breath. . . . No, I was scared to breathe" (37). As a young man, Nector, too, describes learning to hold his breath: in response to the painting that depicts him plunging from a cliff into a rocky river, Nector tells himself, "I'd hold my breath when I hit and let the current pull me toward the surface, around jagged rocks. I wouldn't fight it, and in that way I'd get to shore" (91). Once a survival technique for living in a white world which has taught him it believes "the only good Indian is a dead Indian" (91), this behavior eventually destroys him; Lipsha must learn another way.

Perhaps the first full breath Lipsha takes is the one just before he tells Marie the truth about his phony "love medicine" of frozen turkey hearts. Earlier he tries to tell Nector's ghost of his part in the affair, saying: "I could tell him it was all my fault for playing with power I did not understand. Maybe he'd forgive me and rest in peace" (212-13); but even in death Nector's character cannot listen to the stories people want to share with him. As Lipsha says, "He fooled me though. He knew what I was waiting for, and it wasn't what he was looking to hear" (213). But unlike Nector, Marie is able to hear, and in response to the story, affirms to the child that she used to call "the biggest waste on the reservation" (189): "Lipsha, you was always my favorite" (214). She gives him June's beads, and although he does not yet understand their significance, he feels his healing "touch" (215) return.

Just as Marie's experience on the convent hill teaches her a lesson

which prepares her for what comes after, this experience, along with its accompanying recognition that "Forgiving somebody else made the whole thing easier to bear" (211), gives Lipsha the foundation which will reel him home from the skid row of the border town where he lands when he finally does learn the truth about his parentage. Lulu, at this point in the novel well established, along with Marie, as a storytelling matriarch, has told him he is the child of Gerry and June in the hope that it will "make or break" (245) him. And like so many of the characters in this novel—indeed, like so many of the characters throughout the entire body of twentieth-century American literature—Lipsha's first response to the shame and resentment he feels is to run off and drown his sorrows in drink. Lipsha, however, snaps out of it after a farcical "knock in the skull" (248) from his drinking buddy's "favorite brand" (248) of whisky: "Old Grand Dad" (247). Serving as a punning reminder⁵ of both the death of Grandpa Kashpaw and Lipsha's subsequent recognition of the true nature of "love medicine" that is "not no magic" (214), as well as the existence of his "famous politicking hero" (248) father, Lipsha sobers up and goes off in search of "Dad" (248). When he finds him, he recovers the comic truth that will save him from the army, and aids his father in his own bid for freedom.

Lipsha and Albertine seem the most active seekers of stories, of their own heritage, yet the storytelling theme surfaces for almost all of the characters. At the close even King speaks when Lipsha asks him, although the story King tells is reminiscent of Nector's; King also sees himself as out of control, "stuck down at the bottom with the goddamn minnows" (252). But King is now drinking 7-UP instead of beer, and he adds, "I'm gonna rise. One day I'm gonna rise. They can't keep down the Indians. Right on brother, huh?" (252). Lipsha is surprised that King can "do much more than growl, whine, throw his weight around" and says, "I guess being on the wagon brought him out or something" (252). After these tentative steps toward sharing, Lipsha also notices that, however unconscious the usage, King has for the first time called him "brother."

For King there is at least the sense of possibility, as there is for his father, Gordie, another alcoholic who, at the close, is recovering in detox. In Gordie's third person narrative, which takes place a month after June's death, he attempts to assuage his guilt and grief in the hollow "relief" (180) that comes in a bottle. That "the lack" (175) he feels is an innately spiritual one is emphasized when his "gold-colored" can of beer begins to look to him "as though the can were lit on a special altar" (140). Gordie, however, has "woven his own crown of thorns" (180), and it seems clear that only he can remove what he has

"jammed on his brow" (180). He has not caused June's death any more than Henry Junior, with his "Asian-looking eyes" (83), had created the war which placed him on opposite sides from the dying Vietnamese woman he was asked, not to share with, but to interrogate.

Henry never finds a voice in which to speak of the dying woman's gesture—"You, me, same" (138)—and drowns himself first in liquor and finally, sadly, in the river. Gordie, on the other hand, in a jarring alcoholic delirium, imagines that the deer he has killed is his wife, and begs Sister Mary Martin for absolution from a death he could never have prevented. Still, "telling her had removed some of the burden" (185), and perhaps someday he will be able to confront and share his memories of a different and truer guilt: "His hands remembered things he forced his mind away from . . . what his hands remembered now were the times they struck June" (172-173). An echo of chapter one, it is the "flat of" Gordie's hand about which Albertine remembers June talking.

While all of the narratives related in third person speak for characters who have lost, through trauma, the capacity to speak in their own voices and share their own stories, and although Henry Lamartine Junior and June Kashpaw are dead, there is still the possibility that Gordie, Beverly, and Howard will someday develop the ability to speak for themselves and take charge of their lives. After all, Albertine's 1973 third person narrative is superseded by her 1980 and 1981 first person narratives; if she can make the leap, so too, perhaps, can they. With the exception of Nector, the many first person narrators describe a movement toward forgiveness and transformation through the act of sharing their stories with one another, a movement that influences the entire community. When Lulu and Marie break a lifelong silent grudge over Nector and become "thick as thieves" (241), the combined power of their sharing gives them a special insight; moreover, the once "jabwa witch" (240) and "dirty Lazzar" start helping the reservation by testifying for Chippewa claims. Even the characters on the fringes of the others' narratives participate: Gerry Nanapush has been "on the wagon" for seventeen years, and although he will always be a fugitive from the law, he has become a folk hero who tells his story to the world in newspapers and on national television; he has taken hold of his life with both hands.

Throughout the novel, the narratives balance and play off of one another, forming a crystalline structure with smoothly interwoven themes and symbols. And although each chapter is its own story, able to stand alone, taken all together the novel becomes a synergetic whole of chapters/stories about telling stories. The theme of storytelling as healing, as resolution, as spiritual, thus becomes incorporated into the

structure of the novel itself. In contrast to the dust that obscures vision, and the water that drowns, in the final chapter the characters are humorously drinking 7-Up, and Lipsha says, "The sun flared" (272); with many stories told, nothing is forgotten, yet there is the strong sense of forgiveness and transformation.

NOTES

¹This attitude was particularly common amongst the novel's early reviewers. See, for example, Karl Kroeber's review of *Love Medicine* in *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 9:1 (Winter 1985). However, Robert Silberman again raises the question in "Opening the Text: *Love Medicine* and the Return of the Native American Woman" (*Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Literatures*. Ed. Gerald Vizenor. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989). Silberman calls Albertine Johnson "a loose strand in the plot," and suggests that looseness is a result of "Erdrich's method, which brought together short stories as a basis for the novel" (116). He says that "she disappears from the action after her encounter with Henry Jr. in Fargo, though she is mentioned in a bit of conversation between Lipsha and Gerry, with Lipsha referring to her as 'the one girl I ever trusted'" (116). The problem here is that Silberman has himself forgotten the tenth chapter, "Scales," in which Albertine again serves as narrator, as well as references to her in the twelfth chapter, "Love Medicine," where we learn about her decision to enter medical school.

²Although I disagree with Hanson's suggestion that "the key element of survival [in *Love Medicine*] is knowing when to keep silent" (93), I am in complete accord with her overall thesis, which says that "the Native American is alive and well in Erdrich's deft and expressive hands" (80), and that "Erdrich's characters know and express their capacity to transform and even influence the world around them" (87).

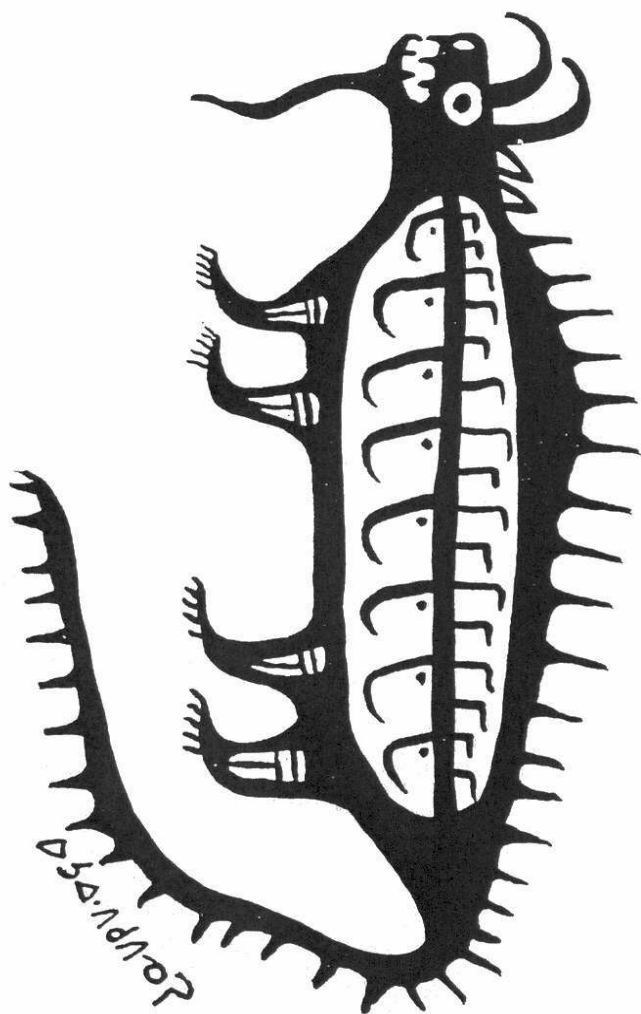
³In a moving account of his adopted son "Adam" (Dorris has changed his son's name to protect his privacy), an account which concludes with a personal narrative written by Adam himself, Michael Dorris has brought the problem of fetal alcohol syndrome to the forefront of the American consciousness. *The Broken Cord* turns statistics into reality, giving them a breadth and form impossible to read with indifference.

⁴Barry and Prescott say, "The novel strongly suggests that Nector's withdrawal from reality may in fact be one of the few choices that he makes for himself" (125), and Louise Flavin says, "Nector is not victimized by his indecisiveness; instead, he profits from the help of others" (58). Elizabeth Hanson says, "Nector, a man whose very name suggests the smooth liquidity of his nature, floats quite naturally to the top of things. His retreats are strategic ones, and his constant onslaughts, whether amorous or political, inevitably succeed" (86).

⁵Erdrich's repeated use of puns and word play in *Love Medicine* has yet to be fully explored. Many critics have remarked on Albertine's humorous musings about "Patient Abuse" (7) and the (purposeful?) misunderstanding by Old Rushes Bear, Nector's mother, of "the great white whale" (91). The puns are not always comic, however, as when June's apparel is described: "Her clothes were full of safety pins and hidden tears" (8). The import of those "hidden tears" may not fully register until Lulu's narrative titled "The Good Tears," and Lipsha's last narrative, "Crossing the Water," in which he describes letting "the tears fall" after his companion tells him it is all right, that "It cleans you out" (247).

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QUESTIONS OF THE SPIRIT: BLOODLINES IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S CHIPPEWA LANDSCAPE

Annette Van Dyke

Louise Erdrich's first and third novels, *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*, are magical history lessons tracing spiritual legacies of a small Chippewa band's attempts to survive the encroachments of Euro-American society. Michael Dorris points out that *Tracks*, the third novel in the proposed four-novel sequence, "takes the older character in both *Love Medicine* and *The Beet Queen* back a generation into a traditional time" (Coltelli 43).¹ Read in the sequence of their story, rather than the sequence of publication, the novels give the reader a glimpse into a world in which women are a force with which to be reckoned. Lulu and Marie emerge in *Love Medicine* as respected elders and keepers of Chippewa ways even through debilitating change. This essay explores the spiritual legacies which begin with the water monster, Misshepeshu, through two sets of mothers and daughters: Pauline Puyat (Sister Leopolda) and her daughter, Marie Lazarre, and Fleur Pillager and her daughter, Lulu Nanapush.² Michael Dorris notes that the inspiration of the symbols of water and the water god shown in *Love Medicine* (and in *Tracks*) is one factor that distinguishes contemporary Chippewa from other rural North Dakota people (Coltelli 45).

In *Tracks*, although the story centers on Fleur, Erdrich uses the device of having her story told to Fleur's daughter, Lulu, by Nanapush, an elderly male trickster character,³ and by Fleur's arch rival, the unreliable narrator, Pauline. The effect of Erdrich's style in *Tracks* and in *Love Medicine*, which also tells the story through multiple voices, is as if the reader is listening to gossip, "the means of exchanging information . . . and so consequently there is no single narrator . . . it is the entire community dealing with the upheavals that emerge from the book . . ." (Dorris quoted in Coltelli 44).

Fleur Pillager is an exemplification of traditional Chippewa⁴ power, and she owes her power to her spirit guardian, Misshepeshu, the water spirit man. William Warren, of Chippewa and Euro-American heritage, identifies the Pillagers as having the "immense fish" as their family totem (45-6). He also refers to it as the "Merman or Water Spirit Totem" (165). Fleur inherits the powerful guardian spirit from her father, Old Man Pillager, who, according to Nanapush, brought the water monster with him when he moved into the area (T 175).⁵ Nanapush says the water spirit then took up residence in Matchimanito Lake near the family cabin; after the death of Fleur's family by

consumption the spirit became identified with Fleur, who kept the lake monster "controlled" when she was around (T 35). Both Nanapush and Pauline connect Fleur with the water man, Pauline negatively and Nanapush more positively.

In Chippewa lore, the water spirits, who are also connected to fish, serpents or water-going snakes, water tigers, and lions, have a mixed reputation.⁶ They give power to control the waters and to net fish, but they are also seen as enemies to the prized bird spirits or Thunderbirds (Landes 24-25, 28, 31; Coleman, Frogner, and Eich 102-03; Barnouw 133).⁷ Connected to the danger of drowning and drawing storms over the water, they were given offerings of tobacco for safe passage (Morriseau 33).

The idea of being mated to the water man, and the conflicting powers of the Thunderbirds and water spirits, appear in a story collected by Henry Schoolcraft and published in 1856. In this story, entitled, "Wa-wa-be-zo-win," a jealous mother-in-law tricks her daughter-in-law into falling far out into Lake Superior. "After the wife had plunged into the lake, she found herself taken hold of by a water-tiger, whose tail twisted itself around her body, and drew her to the bottom. There she found a fine lodge, and all things ready for her reception, and she became the wife of the water-tiger" (194). After going to the lake the husband "painted his face black, and placed his spear upside down in the earth, and requested the Great Spirit to send lightning, thunder, and rain, in the hope that the body of his wife might arise from the water" (194).

In "The Underwater Lion," published by Victor Barnouw, two Chippewa women paddle their canoe across a large lake instead of around the edges, drawing the attention of "a bad manido":

As they got to the middle, they crossed mud, and in the center was a hole of clear water. The water was swirling around the hole, and as they started to cross it, a lion came out of the middle and switched his tail across the boat, trying to turn it over. The girl picked up her little paddle and hit the lion's tail with it, saying, "Thunder is striking you." The paddle cut off the lion's tail, and the end dropped into the boat. When they picked it up, it was a solid piece of copper about two inches thick. . . . When they got across, the girl gave the piece of copper to her father, and he got rich through having it. The copper had certain powers. People would give her father a blanket just for a tiny piece of that copper. They would take that bit for luck in hunting and fishing, and some just kept it in their homes to bring good luck. (132-33)

Besides showing how thunder is called upon to defeat the water spirit, this story also illustrates the connection of the water spirit with copper. Both copper and white metal or hard white substance (mica) figure in the depiction of the water man in *Tracks*. In the Schoolcraft story, the tiger's tail becomes a belt made of "white metal" worn around the wife's waist.

Barnouw also comments that other stories associate the underwater horned serpent with an "erotic role . . . as a lover of girls" (137). In *Tracks*, Pauline describes the water spirit:

Our mothers warn us that we'll think he's handsome, for he appears with green eyes, copper skin, a mouth tender as a child's. But if you fall into his arms, he sprouts horns, fangs, claws, fins. His feet are joined as one and his skin, brass scales, rings to the touch. You're fascinated, cannot move. He casts a shell necklace at your feet, weeps gleaming chips that harden into mica on your breasts. He holds you under. Then he takes the body of a lion, a fat brown worm, or a familiar man. He's made of gold. He's made of beach moss. He's a thing of dry foam, a thing of death by drowning, the death a Chippewa cannot survive. (T 11)

Erdrich's portrayal of the water man combines many elements of the old stories—copper, a gleaming hard white substance, the erotic—as well as an antagonism between thunder and the water spirit.

Pauline regards the water spirits as giving evil visions and making the recipient a sorcerer who will then use his or her powers for evil. She describes Fleur:

Fleur's shoulders were broad and curved as a yoke, her hips fishlike, slippery, narrow. An old green dress clung to her waist, worn thin where she sat. Her glossy braids were like the tails of animals, and swung against her when she moved, deliberately, slowly in her work, held in and half-tamed. But only half. I could tell, but the others never noticed. They never looked into her sly brown eyes or noticed her teeth, strong and sharp and very white. Her legs were bare, and since she padded in beadworked moccasins they never knew she'd drowned. They were blinded, they were stupid, they only saw her in the flesh. (T 18).

According to Pauline, Fleur serves the water spirit man by giving him people for his appetite. Pauline believes that Fleur is responsible for the deaths of the men who have saved Fleur from drowning or have looked upon her as she was reviving. In this respect, Fleur could also be identified with the powers of the funnel current. In Chippewa belief, a

person of great power could not only take on the characteristics of a spirit guardian, but could "become" that spirit. It assumed that any skillful visionary could do evil as well as good by virtue of the great power each held, and if enough evil deeds were traced to a particular visionary, he or she might be killed by others in the group. A humble attitude was to be presented to one's guardian at all times, but some visionaries—those who had overstepped their bounds—came to believe that they had the powers of all the supernaturals at their command (Landes 42-67). Pauline believes that Fleur exudes the water man's dangerous sexuality, and both she and Eli, Fleur's husband, believe that Fleur is mated to the water monster. Pauline speculates about the father of Fleur's child, Lulu. Pauline says that Lulu is "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" (T 31). Eli also believes Fleur is pregnant by the water spirit man, confessing to Nanapush about the baby: "I have dreamed how it will look, strange and fearful, bulging eyes, maybe with a split black tail" (108).

The water monster was believed to lure people to their death by drowning. Even the name of the lake in *Tracks* in which the water spirit man is said to dwell, Matchimanito, means evil spirit, "maci manito" (Hilger 61). Those who drowned remained as spirits, bound to wander forever, and did not take the four-day death road of the Old Ones. Lulu explains this belief in *Love Medicine*: "By all accounts, the drowned weren't allowed into the next life but forced to wander forever, broken shoed, cold sore, and ragged. There was no place for the drowned in heaven or anywhere on earth" (LM 234. See Landes 198). Pauline's assertion that Fleur, taking on attributes of her spirit guardian, is responsible for several such deaths is a serious accusation.

However, *Tracks*' other narrator, Nanapush, says that the water spirit man is "neither good nor bad but simply ha[s] an appetite" (139). Ojibwa artist Norval Morriseau says that his

ancestor . . . four generations ago . . . had a medicine dream concerning an offering rock where the water demigod Misshipeshu, in the form of a huge cat, spoke to him and advised him to put on the rock a sacred sign. . . . From then on until thirty years ago [when the water spirit moved away], Indians of that area offered gifts to Misshipeshu. . . . This huge cat is believed by the Ojibwa to be white in colour, with horns, and very powerful. . . . This big water god, or spirit, knew both good and evil. It all depended on what kind of nature an Indian had. If he were good then he would have the power to do good. If he were bad then he

was given power to do bad. But the true water god, the white one in colour, always brought good luck to all who respected him. (26-27).

Nanapush, drawing on this tradition, identifies Fleur as having a good nature and the water spirit as bringing her luck. He is upset when Fleur seems to lose her powers and will not go down to the lake and "cry out until your helpers listen" (T 177). He feels Fleur's problem is overestimating her powers and taking responsibility for her failures and triumphs alone.

Traditionally, visions might come to young women when they were in seclusion at the onset of their first menses.⁸ At the time the story in *Tracks* begins, Fleur is seventeen and has been rescued from death by Nanapush. Her whole family has died from consumption. Fleur has apparently had a vision of great power connected with the water spirit man. In this desperate time, her near-death experience has simulated the circumstances such as fasting and seclusion which usually prepared young people for a vision. Nanapush says that Fleur "was too young and had no stories or depth of life to rely upon. All she had was raw power, and the names of the dead that filled her" (T 7). Because she leaves Nanapush immediately after she recovers, in order to raise money to pay the taxes on the land she has inherited from her family, and because there are so few of the Chippewa band left, she has no one to instruct her in handling the power from her vision. The fact that Fleur is also "filled" with the names of her dead family is not a good sign as it may mean dissatisfied spirits are clinging to her.⁹

Despite Fleur's spiritual handicaps, her powers connected with the water spirit are numerous. Community gossip associates her with protecting her land from the Indian agent when he comes to collect the taxes. The agent ends up "living in the woods and eating roots, gambling with ghosts" (T 9) out "where the lake monster, Misshepeshu, hid himself and waited" (T 8). Others disappear and share the fate of the agent, "betting with sticks and dice out near Matchimanito" (T 9).

Chippewa writer Gerald Vizenor recalls a story about Naanabozho defeating the evil gambler in a context in which "the spirit of the tribal people would be consigned to the *wiindigoo*, the flesh eaters in the land of darkness" (5). Naanabozho is able to beat the gambler by making "a teasing sound on the wind" which fells the playing pieces (6). In *Tracks*, Fleur goes to a nearby town to earn money to pay the taxes on her land (a journey to save her land/spirit from the whites and herself from starvation). She gambles with the white men in the butcher shop, truly evil men who rape her when they realize they have been bested

by a woman. One of Pauline's versions of the story is that to avenge the rape, Fleur calls down the tornado during which the men are killed under suspicious circumstances. Because they are imprisoned in the meat locker and frozen during their last gambling game, the suggestion is that they have in fact been taken over by the windigo, the cannibalistic ice-monster. In Vizenor's version the evil gambler is described as "a curious being, a person who seemed almost round in shape, smooth and white" (5). Lily, one of the gambling men, is "fat, with a snake's pale eyes and precious skin, smooth and lily-white" (T 18). Fleur's significant skills at gambling allow her to return and pay the taxes on her land as well as buy supplies. However, despite her best efforts, she is unable to keep up the taxes year after year, and she forfeits her land to the loggers. She is able again to call on the funnel cloud to level trees she has sawed, crushing the loggers and their horses.

The spiritual legacy of Fleur's power continues in *Love Medicine* with her daughter, Lulu, who is born in *Tracks* with the aid of a spirit bear (Fleur is also of the bear clan).¹⁰ Like her mother, Lulu has an exuberant animal-like sexuality and the white Pillager teeth. By the end of the book, Lulu has had eight children, all by different fathers—a sort of single-handed repopulating of the people. Nector had intended to marry her when Marie ensnared him in 1934, and in 1952 he realizes he still wants her. The ensuing affair ends with Lulu's house burned down and her hair burned off—continuing the baldness of the Pillager women which started in *Tracks*, when Fleur shaved her head in sympathy with Margaret, whose head was shaved by the Morrisseys as part of the feuding "that would divide our people down the middle through time" (T 109).¹¹

Like her mother, Lulu has "wild and secret ways." She is seen by the rest of the group as operating outside the norm and is rejected for her unconventional and distinctly unchristian ways. She says she "was in love with the whole world and all that lived in its rainy arms." She would "open . . . and let everything inside" so that after a while she "would be full" (LM 216). Like her mother, she feels no remorse for what she does, especially sleeping with other women's husbands. Her mother's land troubles also repeat with Lulu. As the Pillagers' land was betrayed by Margaret Kashpaw, who paid her taxes but not Fleur's, Nector Kashpaw as tribal chairman evicts Lulu from her home on tribal land to build a tomahawk factory.

Lulu also has Fleur's gambling abilities. Lipsha, her grandson, says he learned to "crimp" in card games from Lulu, that she "was the meanest player of them all . . . I learned to crimp from her before I ever knew she was my grandmother, which might explain why I took to it with such enormous ease. The blood tells. I suppose there is a

gene for crimping in your strings of cells" (LM 255).

Pauline Puyat, Fleur's powerful archrival, also embodies traditional Chippewa powers, but she is the character most troubled by being a mixed-blood. A Metis, a descendant of "skinner in the clan for which the name was lost," she sees "through the eyes of the world outside" (T 14). She is obsessed with the water monster, seeing him in Fleur, who both draws and repels her. Pauline enters the convent on her spiritual quest. Having decided that the Chippewa are doomed—"the whites . . . grew in number . . . some even owning automobiles, while the Indians receded and coughed to death and drank" (T 139)—she decides that she can make her mark by leading her people to Christ. While still believing in the water spirit man, she has a vision of Christ, who appears to her at night sitting on the stove at the convent. Instead of dismissing the idea of the power of the water spirit, she vows to fight him as Christ's representative, conflating Christ with a Chippewa bird or sky spirit which was believed to be in eternal conflict with the water spirits. By conflating the water spirit man with Satan, Pauline's beliefs contradict traditional Chippewa ideas about evil. As a Chippewa notes, "In the old days evil spirits were spoken of as doing harm, but no one ever spoke of a leader among them. The belief in the devil came with the Whites" (Hilger 61).

Pauline is a powerful sorcerer who uses her powers for both good and evil. As one who aids the sick and dying in their transition, making their dying easier, she is at her best as the crow-like angel of death: "twirling dizzily, my wings raked the air and I rose in three powerful beats and saw what lay below. . . . I alone, watching, filled with breath, knew death as a form of grace" (T 68). She "entered each house where death was about to come, and then made death welcome" (T 69). However, even the good she does becomes perverted because Pauline "no longer bothered to bathe once . . . [she] left the [death] cabin but touched others with the same hands, passed death on" (T 69), and thereby spread disease. Pauline is at her worst when she is dealing with sexuality; it is then that she uses her considerable powers for evil. She forces Fleur's husband Eli and young Sophie to have intercourse in the slough in broad daylight with "love medicine" which she procures from Fleur's cousin, Moses: "And then, I turned my thoughts on the girl and entered her and made her do what she could never have dreamed of herself. I stood her in the broken straws and she stepped over Eli, one leg on either side of his chest. Standing there she slowly hiked her skirt" (T 83).¹²

Pauline tries to separate Eli and Fleur because she is jealous and feels excluded from the clan which the others have formed "made up of bits of the old, some religious in the old way and some in the new"

(T 70). Much of Pauline's behavior also shows her conflict between her Chippewa heritage and the Euro-American heritage she attempts to claim. While wanting to be part of the Chippewas, she does everything she can to destroy them. In a strange way, she is actually waging a spiritual war of the thunderbird against the water spirit, but she has, as scholar Catherine Rainwater notes, "twisted and deformed [the Chippewa beliefs] away from their shamanic matrix, and grafted [them] into a Christian cosmology" (409).

Pauline is actually received with a good deal of tolerance by the other Chippewas. They observe her to be following a strange spirit guardian who demands odd things from her like wearing her shoes on opposite feet and relieving herself only at "dawn and dusk" (T 147). Even though visionaries are supposed to follow the dictates of their spirit guardians, sometimes those around them try to dissuade them from harmful practices, as in the case of Nanapush's humorous tricking of Pauline into relieving herself in the middle of the day.¹³

Pauline plays out her bizarre amalgamation of Chippewa belief and Catholicism by deciding literally to battle the water spirit man and Fleur's influence, which she sees as holding the Ojibway to the old ways. Pauline almost kills Fleur in her attempt to aid Fleur during the too-early birth of Fleur's stillborn son. Pauline also interferes in Nanapush's curing ceremony for Fleur, saying she has been "sent to prove Christ's ways" (T 190). After her failure to demonstrate Christ's powers at Fleur's ceremony, she believes that Christ has been overcome by the water man: "Christ had turned His face from me from other reasons than my insignificance. Christ had hidden out of frailty, overcome by the glitter of the copper scales, appalled at the creature's unwinding length and luxury . . ." (T 195). She believes that she will be Christ's "champion, His savior" against the water monster (T 195).

Pauline takes to the lake in Nanapush's leaky boat to engage the water spirit while fighting off numerous rescue attempts by both the church people and the Chippewa: "I had determined to wait for my tempter, the one who enslaved the ignorant, who damned them with belief. My resolve was to transfix him with the cross" (T 200). As Rainwater says, "Pauline's distorted version of the lake monster is more horrible than either the Christian Satan, who is not appeasable but who cannot victimize the truly innocent, or the Chippewa monster, who can capture the innocent but who is appeasable" (409). Finally back on shore, she strangles him with her rosary, only to have the monster in the early dawn light take the form of her only lover and the father of her child, Marie. Nevertheless, she is convinced of her feat, for as she says, "How could I have known what body the devil would assume?" (T 203). Pauline, lying about her Indian heritage, now takes the veil

and becomes Sister Leopolda, a position denied by her convent to those with Indian blood.

As Pauline comments, "power travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth" (T 31), and some of her power passes to her daughter, Marie, whom she never acknowledges. Vision is also an important part of Marie's power. She is fourteen, close to the traditional time of visions for young women, when she enters the convent on her spiritual quest as her mother did before her. Marie has been adopted into a marginal family within the tribe—a status not unlike her mother's—a position which she wants to rectify by becoming a saint. She sees Leopolda (who she does not know is her biological mother) as both a rival for sainthood and her teacher. After she has her vision, partly a result of Leopolda's physical mistreatment of her, she sees that she and Leopolda are the same, both human and unlikely candidates for sainthood—both have the "devil" in them which for Leopolda connects to the Chippewa water monster and the windigo, the cannibalistic ice monster. Ice images abound in the section where Marie meets Sister Leopolda.¹⁴ Ironically, Leopolda's name recalls another name for the water spirit man: the Great Lion. In Marie's vision, her own body has characteristics of the water spirit man: "I was rippling gold . . . my nipples flashed and winked. Diamonds tipped them" (LM 50). In *Tracks*, the water monster "casts a shell necklace at your feet, weeps gleaming chips that harden into mica on your breasts . . . He's made of gold" (T 11). After her vision, Marie gives up her dream of sainthood, thereby defeating Leopolda, who wants to consume her as a windigo or the water spirit man would do.

By the second half of the twentieth century, when *Love Medicine* takes place, the characters seldom display outright knowledge of the old ways as they do in *Tracks*, which spans 1912-1924. Traditional ways have become bound up with Catholicism and Euro-American ways. For instance, as an adult, Marie says that she does not pray, but she is still concerned about the community's view of her: "When I was young, I vowed I never would be caught begging God. If I want something I get it for myself. I go to church only to show the old hens they don't get me down" (LM 73). She has forgone both praying to the Christian God and beseeching the Chippewa spirits for favors, which the "begging" idea recalls, but there is a remnant of the water monster, the lure and the fight against the death by drowning mixed in with references to Catholicism and sorrow at the loss of Chippewa culture. As she touches the Cree beads left by June, which she sometimes calls a rosary, Marie says: "I touch them, and every time I do I think of small stones. At the bottom of the lake, rolled aimless by the waves. I think of them polished. To many people it would be a kindness. But I see no kindness

in how the waves are grinding them smaller and smaller until they finally disappear" (LM 73).

Marie is a survivor, and as she descends from the convent after her encounter with her mother, she seizes her chance to improve herself by ensnaring Nector Kashpaw, who is from a well-thought-of family on the reservation. Nector thinks she is "a skinny white girl" (LM 58) making off with the nuns' valuables. At first angered by her audacity, he fights with her, only to end up having sex with her. Then ashamed at what he has done and seeing her wounds from her encounter with Leopolda, he takes her hand, thinking "I don't want her, but I want her, and I cannot let her go" (LM 62). Marie turns her ambition to making her husband Nector one of the most respected men on the reservation—the tribal chairman—and thereby elevating her status. She even monitors Nector so that he keeps his drinking under control. She uses her considerable mothering skills on her own children and those discarded by others, such as June and Lipsha, extending the Euro-American concept of the nuclear family to a more Native American idea of kinship. Marie becomes a positive force to hold her family together on the reservation; her binding of Nector to her holds even through his passionate relationship with Lulu, Fleur's daughter.

Despite their antagonism over Nector, Lulu and Marie heal the long feud between the families. Lulu discovers in the 1980s that the now senile Nector's hankering after her is "just elusive dreams. . . . He had no true memory or mind" (LM 232). After Nector's death, Marie comes to aid Lulu after an operation—"to put tears" in her eyes (LM 235), and they grieve together over him, uniting in their womanness. Marie mothers Lulu, and the putting in of eyedrops becomes a rebirth ritual: "She swayed down like a dim mountain, huge and blurred, the way a mother must look to her just born child" (LM 236).

Combining the power of the spiritual legacies from their maternal bloodlines, Marie who was by tribal standards "A skinny white girl . . . [from] a family of horse-thieving drunks" (LM 58) joins with Lulu from the feared Pillager band, and together they become respected elders on the reservation. Lulu testifies in court about Chippewa land claims, and people begin to credit her with "knowledge as an old-time traditional" (LM 268). Both have been able to use their inherited powers to ensure continuance of the nation, and for the moment, the battle has shifted from infighting among the people to fighting for the land and maintenance of the Chippewa way.

NOTES

¹Michael Dorris is Erdrich's husband and writing collaborator. They go over each other's work "until consensus on all words" is reached (Wong 201). He also says that "*Tracks* was the first one to have the finished draft, but it will be the third one to be published, and it's going to be thoroughly revised and changed in the light of the characters that we know from the other books," suggesting intentional legacies for the characters (Coltelli 51). From now on, I will use T for *Tracks* and LM for *Love Medicine* in the citations.

²Fleur and Pauline (Sister Leopolda) also appear in *The Beet Queen*, but this essay focuses primarily on spiritual legacies connected to the water spirit man and as such will not cover material in *The Beet Queen*.

³This character's name recalls the trickster figure of the Ojibwa whose foolishness brought death to the land, but who also restored the land after a flood. In the accounts of the origin stories, this trickster character has various spellings of his name: Vizenor uses Naanabozho (8-12); Landes uses Nehneh-bush (92-93); James H. Howard uses Nanapus (93-94).

⁴Chippewa and Ojibwa(y) are often used interchangeably. Because Erdrich, who is from Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota, uses Chippewa, I will use it in discussing her work. See discussion of tribal names in Vizenor 14-21.

⁵James G. E. Smith notes that the Pillagers were a powerful band of Chippewa who once resided in the area of Leech Lake, Minnesota, and who moved to the area, formerly occupied by the Sioux, in which Erdrich's story takes place.

⁶Information on the water spirit man can be found in Ruth Landes, Selwyn Dewdney, and Norval Morriseau. In addition to the stories which Erdrich grew up with (as discussed in Wong 204), it appears she has also read some of the ethnographies and other materials relating to the Chippewa, as she uses a quotation from R.W. Dunning's 1959 *Social and Economic Change Among the Northern Ojibwa* as an epigram to her poem, "Jacklight" (*Jacklight, Poems* 3).

⁷For instance, Norval Morriseau, Ojibway artist and writer, records several stories of Misshipeshu stealing babies who were left unattended by Lake Superior, and of the thunderbirds attacking and killing him for this evil deed (31-32).

⁸Young women did not usually prepare themselves for a vision as strenuously as did young men, who went without meals from an early age with their faces blackened with charcoal, a signal they were preparing for a vision. When the young men were ready, usually before puberty, they would go into the woods to await the arrival of a spirit guardian, fasting and thirsting from four to ten days. Information on the Ojibwa vision quest can be found in James H. Howard, *The Plains-Ojibwa*. See also Hilger 44-55. Ojibwa author George Copway relates a story about a young woman fasting for a vision (150-59).

⁹The spirit of a newly dead one was said to attempt to keep contact with kin

and others for the first four days after death, and food and tobacco offerings to aid them in their journey might be left in an especially constructed small wooden house over the grave used when the ground was not frozen.

¹⁰However, this may be a reference to her femaleness, as Barnouw says that "the Canadian Ojibwa associated bears with menstruating girls." Using R. W. Dunning's translations of Ojibwa (in single quotations), Barnouw says, "Approaching the time of a girl's first period, she is known as *wemukowe*—literally, 'going to be a bear'—and during her seclusion she is known as *mukowe*—'she is a bear.'" Further, he notes: "The same Chippewa term was used for both flirting and hunting game, while another Chippewa term 'connotes both using force in intercourse and also killing a bear with one's bare hands'" (248). In *Tracks*, Nanapush's discussion with Eli about women, particularly Fleur, uses bear analogies. For instance, he says: "[I]t's like you're a log in a stream. Along comes this bear. She jumps on. Don't let her dig in her claws" (46).

¹¹According to Copway, cutting a woman's hair from "ear to ear . . . is a mark of disgrace" (140).

¹²There is another reference in this passage to women's sexuality depicted with bear-like qualities—"bear on a log." Pauline says, "She shivered and I dug my fingers through the tough claws of sumac, through the wood-sod, clutched bark, shrank backward into her pleasure" (83).

¹³For an example see Ruth Landes, who tells the anecdote of the warrior whose spirit guardian was Buffalo, who gave the warrior "immense strength but also immense size so that he was a clear target for the enemy and indeed the only one of his party to be seriously wounded" (29). His fellow warriors generally tried to dissuade him from accompanying them on raiding parties and felt a more appropriate guardian would have been Hummingbird, which gave the ability to slip in and out of warfare without being injured.

¹⁴See Helen Jaskoski (57-59) and Catherine Rainwater (404-22) for discussion of conflicts between Euro-American and Native American systems.

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WHY BEARS ARE GOOD TO THINK AND THEORY DOESN'T HAVE TO BE MURDER: TRANSFORMATION AND ORAL TRADITION IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *TRACKS*¹

Joni Adamson Clarke

Before one's eyes, Bear became Wolf, then Bear again. The image didn't change of course. What changed was the observer's organization of its parts. But the effect was one of transformation.

—Edmund Carpenter, "Introduction: Collecting Northwest Coast Art"

... any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*.

—Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel"

I

In *Tracks*, Louise Erdrich transforms her Chippewa oral traditions to create a transformational female character with a "white wolf grin,"² "hips fishlike, slippery, narrow" (T 18), no fifth toes on her feet (T 18) and the "talons of a heavy bear" (T 157). Fleur Pillager is human; yet, at times, she is wolf, water-monster and bear. Indeed, she could be described as a visual pun who disorders the boundaries between human and animal. Even more disturbing, however, Fleur is suspected of transforming her private hairs, smoky powders, crushed snakeroot and Eli Kashpaw's fingernails into a love medicine, "a doll to wear between her legs" (T 49). Readers familiar with Lipsha, the lovable yet bumbling medicine man of *Love Medicine*, will recognize the threat posed by Fleur's possible sorcery.

Asked by Grandma Kashpaw to create a love medicine that will squelch Grandpa Kashpaw's hankering after Lulu Lamartine, Lipsha listens to stories and remembers things he'd "heard gossiped over."³ "These love medicines," he asserts,

is something of an old Chippewa specialty. No other tribe has got them down so well. But love medicine is not for the layman to handle. You don't just go out and get one without paying for it. Before you get one, even, you should go through one hell of a lot of mental condensation. You got to think it over. Choose the right one. You could really mess up your life grinding up the wrong little thing. (LM 199)

This is such terrifyingly serious business that Lipsha steers clear of Old

Man Pillager and does not ask for a proper love medicine. Rather, he grinds frozen turkey hearts—instead of goose hearts—into a concoction on which Grandpaw Kashpaw chokes and dies. Lipsha learns that the "the actual power" of love medicine may be faith but faith is not enough (*LM* 203); one must evoke the power of the gods by knowing how to ask "in the right way" (*LM* 195). Fleur's association with love medicine, then, links her to the transformative power and potential danger of language.

Other Native American novelists also transform their oral traditions into the transformational characters that people their works, a process which N. Scott Momaday, in "The Man Made of Words," calls the "transformation of the tribal mind" or "myths, legends, and lore" into that "mature condition which we call literature" (107, 105). In Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*, for example, a young boy wanders into "the place which belonged to the bears" (129) and begins to be transformed. A medicine man must call him back gently with "mother bear sounds" or he could "be in between forever / and probably he would die" (129, 130). And in *The Ancient Child*, Momaday transforms traditional Kiowa stories of a mythical boy who becomes a bear into the novel's main protagonist, Locke Setman, called Set. Set has lost his sense of identity and comes to feel more and more like the bear boy whose people were no longer able, after his transformation, to understand his language. Set teeters on the edge of madness, and speech begins to seem "the most important and necessary thing in his life," but "he did not even know what he wanted to say, *had* to say, if only he could say it" (73-74).

These transformational characters depend upon language: the Bear Boy will return but only if he is called back gently, Set will be healed but only if he discovers what he must say, and the power of Fleur's love medicine, as Lipsha's experience implies, will be efficacious only if she knows "how to ask in the right way" (*LM* 195). Transformational characters suggest, then, that Native American novelists are doing some serious—yet playful—theorizing about both the compelling power and menacing danger of language. By focusing on the perilously composite Fleur, I would like to examine how Louise Erdrich is transforming the novel into a site of imaginative theoretical discourse which challenges the notion that theory can only exist in language that is heavy, abstract, prescriptive, monotonous and accessible only to the few who are academically trained to understand "high discourse."

II

While a parallel could be drawn between Lipsha's discussion of love medicine and Derrida's discussion of the remedy and poison of the

"pharmakon," some scholars would be loath to call fictions about bears and love medicines "theory" in the sense that Derrida's works on speech and writing are deemed "theory." Theory, as Trinh T. Minh-ha has observed in *Woman, Native, Other*, is often thought to be written by men, and it is a commonplace to say that theory "usually refers to inaccessible texts that are addressed to a privileged, predominantly male social group" (41). She adds that theory has come to be "synonymous with 'profound,' 'serious,' 'substantial,' 'scientific,' 'consequential'" (41). Fiction, on the other hand, is often written by women and frequently described by adjectives that are the antithesis of those used to describe theory—"playful," "imaginative," "non-serious." Fictional or imaginative works, therefore, are often not perceived as "theory."

In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White trace how certain "high" discourses came to be valorized over those considered "low." The ancient taxation categories of "*classici*" and "*proletarius*," they write, subsequently led to distinctions between what was to be considered high and low discourse. This development in the generic terminology of antiquity "had an enduring influence on the European system of hierarchizing authors and works . . . [,] separated out a distinct elite set (the *classici*) from the commonality (the *proletarius*) and used this as a model for literary discriminations" (1). The result, Stallybrass and White maintain, was that any utterance became "legitimated or disregarded according to its place of [either high or low] production" (80). Only certain kinds of technical and philosophical writing, usually "constructed" as "high discourse" by those "normally associated with the most powerful socioeconomic groups" and connected to church, state or academy (4) came to be valued and accepted as high discourse in Western literary traditions. This helps explain why the producers of "high" theoretical discourse, who have usually been men, generally have a prestige which gives them the authority "to designate what is to be taken as high and low in the society" (Stallybrass and White 4).

In the contemporary literary world, as Barbara Christian affirms in "The Race for Theory," works which are designated "theory" and produced by the academic elite have become a "commodity which helps determine whether we are hired or promoted in academic institutions—worse, whether we are heard at all" (335). The result, Christian asserts, is that "critics are no longer concerned with literature, but with other critics, texts" (335). Contemporary fiction, often written by women and "bursting with originality, passion, insight and beauty" is subordinated to "one primary thrust, that moment when one creates a theory" (335). Moreover, the philosophical language of "high" theoretical discourse often "mystifies rather than clarifies," making it

possible "for a few people who know that particular language to control the critical scene" (Christian 338).

But as Stallybrass and White point out, the view of discourse from "above" and the view of discourse from "below" are necessarily different (4). From the perspective of those who often do not have access to the power of the elite, or more specifically, as Gloria Anzaldúa asserts in her Introduction to *Making Face, Making Soul*, from the perspective of women-of-color, the problem with contemporary literary theory is that it "does not translate well when one's intention is to communicate to masses of people made up of different audiences"; so, what is considered "theory in the dominant academic community is not necessarily what counts for theory for women-of-color" (xxv). The theorizing of women-of-color, writes Christian, "(and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, . . . in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking" (336).

Originally "theory" meant a mental viewing, contemplation, speculation, spectacle, a conception or mental scheme of something to be done.⁴ Indeed, as Trinh asserts,

theory is no longer . . . theoretical when it loses sight of its own conditional nature, takes no risk in speculation, and circulates as a form of administrative inquisition. Theory oppresses, when it wills or perpetuates existing power relations, when it presents itself as a means to exert authority—the Voice of Knowledge. (42)

When viewed from this perspective, Trinh adds, the "borderline between theoretical and non-theoretical writings is blurred and questioned, so that theory and poetry necessarily mesh" (42). Derrida's works, which are themselves very playful, become not just theory but imaginative fiction, and Louise Erdrich's novels can be seen not just as poetical fiction but also as theory. Once we "give up the notion that there is a 'correct' way to write theory," Anzaldúa writes, we can learn to appreciate and understand "other modes of consciousness," other ways of doing theory (xxvi, 333). A novel which is dynamic, imaginative and speculative becomes a likely site for theoretical discourse. It becomes possible to appreciate how contemporary Native American novels, and in particular *Tracks*, expose "one of the most powerful ruses of the dominant" which is to pretend that theoretical discourse "can only exist in the language of 'reason,' 'pure knowledge,' and 'seriousness'" (Stallybrass and White 43).

III

In *Tracks*, Nanapush, Fleur's trickster-like grandfather, makes the observation that there is a design to the stories (T 34), that they are "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). Dreaming and talking, he muses,

I liked to set out there and watch the road to see the design of people on their errands, to church and town, the eager step of courting boys, the secretive slide of lovers, the loads of hay that our best farmers, the Lamartines and Morrisseys, drove back and forth in poplar racks, the girls walking to the mercantile by twos, bearing cans of precious cream between them. (T 37)

From this carnival of images, Nanapush creates a new story or text, a new "pattern,"¹⁵ to use his own word, which is so powerful that he specifically credits it with the power to heal. "During the year of sickness," he remembers, "when I was the last one left, I saved myself by starting a story" (T 46).

Here, Nanapush is making an observation similar to one made by Julia Kristeva about how texts are produced. Indeed, he could be describing the process by which Erdrich herself creates both Fleur and her novel, *Tracks*. Any text, Kristeva asserts in "Word, Dialogue and Novel," "is the absorption and transformation of another" (37), a kind of "destructive genesis" (47) where "texts meet, contradict and relativize each other" (49). By absorbing and transforming traditional Chippewa stories of Wolf, Water-Monster and Bear and then re-embodying them in a new pattern to create Fleur, Erdrich generates a new pattern, a new text. Within the space of her novel, she allows traditional Chippewa myths of transformation to meet, contradict and relativize each other.

Nanapush's description of his new pattern as "hooked one side to the other, mouth to tail" aptly describes the myths which Erdrich transforms to create her text. According to A. Irving Hallowell, myths of transformation occur frequently among the Chippewa and illustrate a world view in which no sharp lines can be drawn dividing living beings. What "looks like a bear may sometimes be an animal" and on other occasions may be a "transformed person with evil intent" (Hallowell 158-59, 163-64). In Erdrich's novel, several Chippewa myths of transformation meet, contradict and become "hooked mouth to tail" in the ambiguous character of Fleur. At times, Fleur, with her "teeth, strong and sharp and very white" (T 18), clearly embodies the traits of the mythic Wolf of traditional Chippewa lore. In the old

stories, Wolf is sometimes the grandson and sometimes the underworld brother of Nanabozho (Dewdney 127), whom Gerald Vizenor describes as the compassionate woodland trickster (3). Similarly, Fleur, whose family is decimated by the spotted sickness, becomes the adopted grandchild of Nanapush, who is a trickster/healer like Nanabozho and who brings Fleur back from the underworld with words and songs (*T* 4).

Yet on other occasions, with her "skin of lakeweed" (*T* 22), thin, green dress and damp, tail-like braids (*T* 18), Fleur seems to be Misshepesshu, the water monster, who was said by traditional Chippewa to be the underworld protector of Wolf and to cause death by drowning (Dewdney 128-129, 39). In this form, Fleur embodies the characteristics of a snake, who appears and disappears rapidly and who by sloughing off its skin seems to be immortal.⁶ Fleur's two near drownings as a young girl give the impression that she has been afforded more than one life, and when Jean Hat and George Many drown in Matchimanito Lake, she is suspected as the cause (*T* 11).

By disordering traditional Chippewa oral narratives of Wolf and Water-Monster and then re-embodying them in a new pattern, Erdrich creates a character who is slippery, changeable and mysterious. She further underscores Fleur's bodily ambiguity and affords her great powers by strongly associating her with bears. Fleur belongs to the Pillager family, members of the bear clan who were possessors of both the power which "travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth" (*T* 31) and the knowledge of "secret ways to cure and kill" (*T* 2). That Fleur is a powerful medicine woman whose bear power enables her to effect wonderful cures is evidenced when, in a brief and again mysterious appearance as an older woman in *The Beet Queen*, she repairs Karl Adare's broken ankles and heals his pneumonia. Waking just before dawn, breathing more freely, Karl recalls his cure: "A bear rose between the fire and the reeds. In the deepest part of the night, the biggest animal of all came through in a crash of sparks and wheels" (51).

Bears, according to anthropologist Ruth Landes, were highly respected among traditional Chippewa for their mysterious qualities. Bears were considered "quasi-human, in anatomy, erect carriage, cradling of young with the forearms, enjoyment of sweets and liquors, manner of drinking liquid, shows of intelligence, [and] inclination to moderate behavior despite great physical strength" (27). Accordingly, they were often greeted as "honored guests" and treated to special foods known to suit their appetites, such as tobacco and berries (Landes 35). Moreover, a bear's life cycle, moving from hibernation in winter to reemergence in the spring, made him seem at once a symbol of both

death and life. As Victor Turner, in his discussion of snakes and bears, so aptly puts it, "This coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that and yet both" ("Betwixt" 99).⁷

That bears are often thought of as "betwixt and between" helps to explain why they are credited with such great powers. In tribal societies, symbolic or totemic creatures are singled out, as Barbara Babcock astutely observes, "not because they were 'good to eat' or 'good to prohibit' but because they were 'good to think'" (167). In other words, by thinking or "playing" with the bear's human-like qualities and seasonal cycle, formerly sharp borders—like those between animal and human, death and life—fade and "novelty emerges from unprecedented combinations of familiar elements" (Turner, "Liminal" 160). The seeming ambivalence of bears, then, is precisely what makes them "good to think." Similarly, Erdrich portrays Fleur as physically ambiguous, and this makes her a character that is "good to think" because, as Judith Butler points out in her discussion of the subversion of gendered identity, "perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization" (138).

This openness to resignification, however, makes Fleur, like all liminally ambiguous creatures, dangerous, because she embodies what Julia Kristeva calls "the abject," or in other words, that which "disturbs identity, system, order" (*Powers* 4). Fleur disturbs order when, after losing her family, she leaves the traditional Chippewa world seeking a way to save the Pillager land from the tax collector. When she returns from the marginal town of Argus to live alone at Machimanito Lake tongues fly, for "a young girl had never done such a thing before" (*T* 8). Her anomalous actions are interpreted as a dangerous questioning of accepted social order because they de-form the continuously repeated traditions which have established what is considered normal or natural in her community; by failing to repeat those traditions, Fleur, like the "liminal monsters" which Turner discusses in "Process, System, and Symbol," reveals the "freedom, the interdeterminacy underlying all culturally constructed worlds" (161). And since a given society may see anything that is not "subject to its laws" as "potentially against it" (*Douglas* 4), Fleur becomes, in the eyes of her people, abnormal and unnatural and therefore dangerous.

Both her inherited bear power and her anomalous actions lead Fleur's community to credit her with the malign powers of a bearwalking sorcerer, or in other words, one who transforms herself into a bear in order to use her power for self-aggrandizement. Bearwalkers manifest their evil power by appearing as bright lights at night, stealing

the fingers and tongues of the dead, and causing the dreaded "twisted mouth" (Dorson 27; Landes 65). Fleur, it is rumored, has gotten herself into some "half-forgotten medicine" which causes her to cross boundaries and mess with evil, laugh at the old women's advice and dress like a man (T 12). She is thought to be the reason that the Agent spends the whole night "following the moving lights and lamps of people who would never answer him" and eventually ends up "gambling with ghosts" (T 9). She is suspected of performing such nefarious work as laying the "heart of an owl on her tongue," keeping "the finger of a child in her pocket" (T 12), stalking the Morrissey who caused "the Pillager baldness," then clipping his hair and paring his nails in order to afflict him with "twisted mouth" (T 122). Ironically, the men who rape Fleur in Argus freeze in a meat locker though wrapped in the skins of bears (T 30). And predictably, it is Fleur who is suspected of causing the tornado that turns everything in Argus "upside down" (T 28).

Like Fleur, *Tracks* is a transformational text which cavorts in the margins and flirts with danger because it plays with different parts of traditional myths, pulls stories this way and that and threatens to alter the shape of the oral tradition by bringing it into a new, written, pattern. But as the following scene implies, Erdrich is not unmindful of the destruction or danger inherent in what Kristeva has called the "generative process" ("Word" 47). As Nanapush sits reading his newspaper from Grand Rapids, his wife, Margaret, wishes to speak with him. But "there was bad news from overseas and I wasn't about to let Margaret spoil my concentration or get past my hiding place" (T 47). In anger, Margaret swipes

at the sheets with her hand, grazed the print, but never quite dared to flip it aside. This was not for any fear of me, however. She didn't want the tracks rubbing off on her skin. She never learned to read, and the mystery troubled her. (T 47)

Margaret's revulsion to the written word or "tracks," and Nanapush's frank admission that he sometimes hides behind his newspaper from the humanizing influence of voice and dialogue, imply that Erdrich is aware of the potential danger of setting oral stories into writing. An oral story, as Bernard Hirsch points out, once fixed on the page and removed from its "immediate context, from the place and people who nourished it in the telling" could be robbed of its meaning (1).

However, all transformational art, writes Levi-Strauss in his discussion of Northwest Coast Mask art, questions and answers other past or present myths and must be considered in relation to the art

which it absorbs and transforms; it cannot be "considered in isolation" ("Masks" 93). In her analysis of Laguna witch woman stories, T.C.S. Langen makes a similar observation about oral storytelling. Each telling or version of a story, she writes, is a "realization of possibilities provided by the collection" of renditions or versions of that story, and "no one version is an isolate, either for the storyteller or the audience, but resounds against the knowledge of the collection held by each person present at the performance" (6). In the Chippewa community, Ruth Landes has observed, variant versions of myths and stories have always "shifted with the personalities speaking, perhaps with the occasions, and with the localities" (199). A storyteller, notes Landes, would revise and retell a story while the audience, already familiar with the stories as traditionally told, understood that the teller's version was an interpretation of the "fixed" text. In other words, a new telling or version of a story can at once be a criticism and commentary on the tale as previously told. "What we hear" from the storyteller, Dennis Tedlock asserts, "is simultaneously something new *and* a comment on [the] relic, both a restoration and a further possibility" (236).⁸

Tracks, then, though set in print, does not rob the tales it transforms of their meaning, because it resounds against all past and present tellings of the tales and realizes their potential. The novel enters into an ongoing critical conversation, if you will, with past and present tellers of traditional Chippewa myths; however, Erdrich's "interpretation" of traditional tales *does* disorder the order of the oral tradition and threaten to alter its shape. But this is precisely where the potential power of this boundary-transgressing text lies. As Mary Douglas explains in *Purity and Danger*, the "danger which is risked by boundary transgression is power" (161). Order, Douglas observes,

implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realized in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. (94)

By playing with the myths of Wolf, Missepeshu, and Bear, Erdrich opens these transformational myths to the power and potential of resignification and recontextualization and in them finds the materials for new pattern. In a sense, she is doing what a sorcerer or bearwalker does when creating a love medicine. By bringing together the "marginal stuff" which traverses the outer limits of the body and represents the vulnerability of all boundaries—nail and hair clippings, spittle, milk, blood and tears—the sorcerer symbolically invokes those powers which are constantly menacing order, threatening to disorder previously

established limits (Douglas 121). Using words, the sorcerer then attempts to control this power and "transform the path of events by symbolic enactment" (Douglas 86). But this is very dangerous, for "words correctly said are essential to the efficacy of an action" (Douglas 86); if words are not correctly said, powers might shoot out uncontrollably, menacingly. This potential for both power and danger explains why traditional Chippewa were often horrified by the thought of love medicine (Landes 62).

Like her character Lipsha, author Erdrich listens to the stories and finds the powerfully energized "marginal stuff" from which to create a liminal monster, an ambiguously transformational text which is "good to think" because it disorders the problematic boundaries between the oral and the written and reveals the potential for new pattern. Erdrich's challenge, however, is to repattern the stories with words that will be "correctly said," to create a love medicine that will be able to control the very real power *and* danger of her disordered materials. Depending on how they are recontextualized, the power of the traditional stories can be transformed for good or for ill. If Erdrich's "version" fails to preserve the voices and variant tellings of the oral tradition, it can, like Derrida's *pharmakon*, be poison; if the narrative is composed in such a way that it perpetuates what Nanapush calls the "design of the people" and the "stories" (T 37, 34), then it can be cure.

IV

Though *Tracks* is unavoidably cut off from the breath of the storyteller, Erdrich demonstrates the dialogic nature of the oral tradition and shows, to use the words of Arnold Krupat, "a reluctance to give up the voice in favor of the text" (*Voice* 20). Erdrich invokes the "feel" of an oral performance and emphasizes the novel as a form of discourse by narrating the novel from two points of view. Both narrators—one a neurotic nun and the other a trickster grandfather—tell Fleur's story in the first person, as if their audience were present and engaged in the act of judging which narrator's version—Pauline's or Nanapush's—is more credible. This storytelling strategy creates distance from certainty and asserts that there is never "one true telling" of a story, but only differing versions. In this way, Erdrich narrates her novel through "play" and undercuts any monologic position she might take as a storyteller.

Pauline's interpretation or theory of Fleur differs dramatically from Nanapush's. A mixed-blood Catholic, Pauline characterizes herself as "devious and holy" (T 69), but she is characterized by Nanapush as "a born liar" (T 53), one given to using words to tell "odd tales that created damage" (T 39). Pauline is always associated with death, and

at the death bed of a dying girl sees herself as a hovering scavenger; "twirling dizzily, my wings raked the air, and I rose in three powerful beats and saw what lay below" (T 68). Her employment of washing and laying out the dead is appropriate, for as Nanapush observes, she is "afraid of life" but "good at easing souls into death" (T 57). Because she is so tall and skinny that men look past her without even seeing her, because she is so greedy that she can eat Fleur's food even when Fleur is pregnant and malnourished (T 145), and because she seems "afflicted, touched in the mind" (T 39), Erdrich implies Pauline is "windigo." Helen Jaskoski explains that in traditional Chippewa tales,

Windigo is a giant, a skeleton of ice, the embodiment of winter starvation, a cannibal who can devour whole villages. *Windigo* sickness occurs when this dangerous spirit takes possession of a human soul, causing an irresistible desire to consume human flesh. Individuals subject to such possession show signs of their vulnerability in greedy gluttony, especially an insatiable appetite for fat and grease. . . . Sometimes the monster itself is not killed but returns to natural human life after being relieved of its icy carapace; in the same way, a person afflicted with *windigo* psychosis might return to normal after melting or losing the heart of ice. (57)

Pauline's cold "cannibalism" manifests itself when she closes the door to the meat locker in Argus, causing two men to freeze to death and another, as a result of his ordeal, to lose his rotting flesh, little by little. Later, she strangles her abandoned child's father, Napoleon Morrissey, with a rosary (T 27, 62, 202). "I stuffed the end of the blanket in his mouth," she remembers, "pushed him down into the sand and then fell upon him and devoured him, scattered myself in all directions, stupefied my own brain in the process so thoroughly that the only things left of intelligence were my doubled-over hands" (T 202). To atone for her sins, she enters a Catholic convent with a vengeance, but even in her new vocation her greed is insatiable. Seeking to hoard spiritual knowledge, she miswears her shoes for mortification, wears undergarments made of potato sacks and never pays an extra visit to the privy.⁹ Despite these outward shows of pious humility, however, Pauline's icy, windigo heart does not melt. "All winter," she admits, "my blood never thawed" (T 136).

Though Pauline scorns Chippewa belief in the power of bears and the evil of the water monster, she thinks of Satan as Missepeshu and sees both Fleur and Nanapush as Satan's agents.¹⁰ Like the feared Chippewa sorcerers who were linked to the "lion" in the lake and who "did not use their knowledge for the good of the tribe . . . but merely

for personal aggrandizement" (Dewdney 120), Pauline piously determines that she will use "the net of my knowledge" (T 140) to "guide [the people], to purify their minds, to mold them in my own image" (T 205). Sometimes telling the truth, sometimes—according to Nanapush—lying, but always molding and purifying her story to fit her single-minded vision of theological certainty, Pauline, as Kristeva might say, "kills substance to signify" (*Revolution* 75). Even after the murder of Napoleon Morrissey, for example, she can say, "I felt a growing horror and trembled all through my limbs until it suddenly was revealed to me that I had committed no sin. There was no guilt in this matter, no fault" (T 203). Assuring herself that she could not have known what shape the devil would take, she molds her interpretation of events to fit her high and holy purpose.

Pauline's twisted, self-inflicted penance determines the way she shapes her interpretation of Fleur. She comes to believe that her people, the Chippewa, are like the buffalo—unavoidably dying out (T 140); so, she gives herself a "mission" to "name and baptize" her people and lead them away from the traditional four day road to the "new road" of Christ (T 140). Since Fleur is linked to the traditional ways—dances, love medicines, ceremonies and cures—Pauline decides Fleur is a "hinge" that can "close the door or [swing] it open" (T 139) and keep the people from entering upon Christ's road. As she seeks to "close this door" just as she closed the door of the meat locker, words become Pauline's weapons and Fleur the target of vicious rumors. Fleur, Pauline lets it be known, is most probably a bearwalker (T 12) and her baby almost certainly the progeny of the watermonster (T 31). Significantly, Pauline, who is "afraid of life, . . . afraid of birth, afraid of Fleur Pillager" (T 57), kills the last bear on the reservation (T 58).

Nanapush tells his version of Fleur very differently from the way Pauline renders hers. Since Nanapush knows of secret medicines, "plants to spread so that I could plunge my arms into a boiling stew kettle, pull meat from the bottom, or reach into the body itself and remove . . . the sickness" (T 188), the text implies that he, like the trickster Nanabozho, is a healer. Unlike Pauline, he is always associated with life and prevents death with words. "During the year of sickness, when I was the last one left, I saved myself by starting a story. . . . I got well by talking. Death could not get a word in edgewise, grew discouraged, and traveled on" (T 46). However, Nanapush also understands the danger of words. He "spoke aloud the words of a government treaty and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake" (T 2), so he had witnessed first hand the role that language can play in the systematic oppression of a people. As "for government promises," he notes, "the wind is

steadier" (T 33).

Unlike Pauline, Nanabush does not believe his people are a noble but dying race. "We Indians are like a forest," he asserts: "The trees left standing get more sun, grow thick" (T 184). Consequently, in Fleur, "the lone survivor of the Pillagers," Nanabush sees the "funnel of our history" (T 178). He sees that through her powerful bear-clan bloodline, the old ways course into the modern world. Through her, the Manitou speak: "Turtle's quavering scratch, the Eagle's high shriek, Loon's crazy bitterness, Otter, the howl of Wolf, Bear's low rasp" (T 59).¹¹ Nanapush understands how Fleur's ties to the other world of the Manitou can provide her with the power to survive and endure in a world where "trouble [comes] from the living, from liquor and the dollar bill" (T 4). He does not seek to kill or "close the door" to the manifold, polyvocal traditions which she embodies; instead, pressing charcoal into her hand, he urges her to "Go down to the shore," and "Make your face black and cry out until your helpers listen" (T 177).

While Pauline's interpretation of Fleur is suspect because of her aberrant theological bias, Nanapush's interpretation cannot be entirely trusted either. After all, he was given his name, as his father tells him, because it had "to do with trickery" (T 33). Nanapush is associated, therefore, with the trickster Nanabozho who, according to Gerald Vizenor, "wanders in transformational space" (3) and "represents a spiritual balance in a comic drama rather than the romantic elimination of human contradiction and evil" (4). Tricksters, Barbara Babcock explains, are paradox personified; as "criminal" culture-heroes, they are "positively identified with creative powers" yet constantly behaving "in the most antisocial manner we can imagine" ("Tolerated" 147). Nanapush may be able to cure with words but, paradoxically, his "high" position as healer is often hard to take seriously because of his constantly comic, "low" behavior. He is not above engaging in lewd joking with Margaret, nor is he shy about lifting Pauline's habit with his walking stick in an effort to discover how she manages the "low functions" while wearing rudely sewn potato sacks (T 143).

Because Fleur does not narrate her own story, because her story is narrated by a "high" and holy nun who would suppress life itself in her attempt to impose homogeneous order on heterogeneous reality and by a "low" pagan (T 143) who would celebrate contradiction, and because Erdrich literally transforms and embodies oral traditions in a written narrative, *Tracks* is unconventional in both form and content—doubly transgressive. But in transgressing and disordering the boundaries of conventional novelistic form, Erdrich finds materials for a narrative style which lends itself perfectly to the creation of a transformational character who has many faces and no fixed identity, who cannot be

brought into any kind of order. The contradictory interpretations of Fleur, like the oral tradition itself, become the object of continual interpretation and retelling—changeable, disreputable, contradictory and variable. As Catherine Rainwater notes, Erdrich's narrative strategy makes the "problematic nature of interpretation" apparent (413) and draws her reader into the storytelling process. Finally, the reader, just as if she were at an actual oral storytelling performance, must listen to both Pauline's and Nanapush's stories and create her own interpretation or theory of Fleur by carefully weighing what she knows about the two narrators against their interpretations of the story; then the reader must "hook" parts of each version of the story together to create a "design" (T 37) of her own.

As Rainwater points out, *Tracks* "does not overdetermine one avenue of interpretation" (Rainwater 410); but Erdrich does dramatically illustrate the difference between those, like Pauline, who use "high" institutionally-sanctioned language to dangerously constrict, objectify, and dehumanize, and those, like Nanapush, who playfully insist on the ambiguous, ironic, liberating aspects of language to confront the violence of controlling systems—be they governmental, religious, economic or textual. As Nanapush tells Father Damien, in an animated discussion of whether or not the "unyielding surfaces" of the Catholic church's pews are "helpful," "[T]he old gods were better, the Anishinabe¹² characters . . . were not exactly perfect but at least they did not require sitting on hard planks" (T 110). Here, Nanapush invokes the "old gods" to unmask and undermine those who would pretend to an authority based on natural order and/or neutral legality. Erdrich disorders the boundaries between "high" and "low" by demonstrating how the oral tradition, which has usually been assigned to the category of "low" discourse¹³ because it is historical, changing, contradictory and unwritten, can live in the "tracks" of a printed text and serve as the antithesis of all that is hard, unyielding or finished, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook.

Tracks playfully transforms oral myths of bears, bearwalkers, lion-monsters, love-medicines, sorcerors, old-gods and windigo into a speculative discussion of the power and danger of language to either constrict or liberate; consequently, the novel is the kind of dynamic theory which, Kristeva might say, is "not a form of murder" (*Revolution* 72) because it does not "kill substance to signify" (*Revolution* 75) nor mask the polyphony of many voices. To use Nanapush's words, "Death [can] not get a word in edgewise" here (T 46), and that makes *Tracks* a love medicine which is not poison but cure.

Nanapush specifically credits stories with the power to heal (*T* 46), and thus Erdrich implies that she does not transgress and disorder the boundaries of the oral tradition, or transfer her culture's myths and narratives from one site of discourse to another just for the sake of entertainment.¹⁴ As Mary Douglas explains, whenever members of a given society question or transgress agreed-upon boundaries, the questions are usually not phrased primarily to satisfy human curiosity about the seasons and the rest of the natural environment. The "relation of cloud to rain and rain to harvest, of drought to epidemic . . . are taken for granted as the back-drop against which more personal and pressing problems can be solved" (90). Instead, questions are usually phrased to "satisfy a dominant social concern" (91). The live issue, writes Douglas, "is how to organise other people and oneself in relation to them; . . . how to gain one's rights, how to prevent usurpation of authority, or how to justify it" (91).

When Fleur questions the boundaries of her world and ventures beyond the confines of traditional Chippewa society, her questioning is a response to an urgent social concern: how to save her land. In short, she is searching for a way to survive in a changing world. She becomes what Edmund Leach has called a "marginal creature," one of those incarnate deities, virgin mothers, or supernatural monsters who are half human/half beast and are "specifically credited with the power of mediating" between "logically distinct categories" such as "this world and the other world" (39). Fleur illustrates that survival will necessitate a crossing of boundaries between the traditional Chippewa world and the world of White government, religion, economics and custom. Her anomalousness repulses her community; and yet, at the same time, her search for a way to survive fascinates them because it offers the possibility that she may become the possessor of great knowledge and power, a potential mediator.

In response to Erdrich's own questions and concerns about her people and her world, *Tracks* mediates between the logically distinct, yet problematic categories of oral and written to tell the story of Fleur's survival and endurance. The novel illustrates how transforming the old stories into new forms can help answer urgent questions of social and practical concern and be, as Nanapush repeatedly affirms, healing. Perhaps a story from *Love Medicine*, which Lipsha remembers as he stands on a bridge and looks at the river below, best explains this relationship between stories and healing. The river, Lipsha recalls, "was the last of an ancient ocean, miles deep, that once had covered the Dakotas and solved all our problems. It was easy to still imagine us beneath them vast unreasonable waves, but the truth is we live on dry

land" (*LM* 272). Compelled to remember this tale by concern for himself and his community, Lipsha's new telling of the story in a new setting becomes a bridge or mediator between the old ways and the changed world in which he finds himself; Lipsha's contemporary interpretation of the story is healing because it infuses him with a power that will help him survive and endure.

VI

Tracks, then, demonstrates that literature, and in particular the novel, offers multiple narrative possibilities which can be employed to defy any fixed pronouncement or theoretical stance that, in Trinh's words, "presents itself as a means to exert authority—the Voice of Knowledge" (42). Because of these narrative possibilities, writes Anzaldua, many contemporary women-of-color occupy and transform the novel into a "theorizing space" (xxv) where "social issues such as race, class and sexual difference are intertwined with the narrative and poetic elements of the text" (xxvi). In this theorizing space, the terms "high" and "low," which are often employed as virtual synonyms for the terms "textuality" and "orality" and "theory" and "fiction," are exposed as value-laden and artificial. Indeed, Erdrich's novel bridges the gap between high and low discursive space and challenges those who would pretend that theoretical discourse can only exist in learned journals and be understood by those whose academic degrees confer upon them the authority to read and understand its heavy, serious and abstract language.

In language which is pithy, pleasurable and accessible to large audiences, *Tracks* assumes an implicitly theoretical stance¹⁵ by taking up the "changing, ongoing, vital [Chippewa] oral and literary traditions" which, as Erdrich tells interviewer Kay Bonnetti, "form [her] work" (98) and transforming them into a written narrative which constantly transgresses boundaries between traditional narratives and contemporary written narrative, present and relevant past—questioning and reinterpreting each in order to create new patterns from old elements. In this way, Erdrich brings the beauty, vitality, and healing potential of the old stories forward into the present to help ensure that "the oral tradition remain viable for generations to come."¹⁶ The story, writes Erdrich, "comes up different every time, and has no ending, no beginning" (*T* 31).¹⁷

NOTES

¹As Kristeva notes in the passage I quote at the head of this essay, "any text is the absorption and transformation of another." A quick glance at the list of works this paper cites will reveal that my title absorbs and transforms the title of Barbara Babcock's essay "Why Frogs are Good to Think and Dirt is Good to Reflect On" which, in turn, is a playful absorption and transformation of "Levi-Strauss's repeated assertion that certain animals are singled out as symbolic or totemic creatures" because they are "good to think" (Babcock 167).

²Subsequent references to this novel will be cited parenthetically as *T*, with page numbers in the text.

³Subsequent references to this novel will be cited parenthetically as *LM*, with page numbers in the text.

⁴See *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 Vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971) 2: 3284.

⁵Remembering how he saved Fleur from the sickness, Nanapush states, "I was entangled with her. Not that I knew it at first. Only looking back is there a pattern" (*T* 33).

⁶For more on the snake's transformative powers, see Susan Scarberry-García's *Landmarks of Healing* (43), and Turner's "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*" (99).

⁷In *Landmarks of Healing: A Study of House Made of Dawn*, Susan Scarberry-García's chapter entitled "Bears and Sweet Smoke" has an excellent discussion on the bear as a "primary model of transformation" and "the living embodiment of the continuously generating healing powers of nature" (40).

⁸See Tedlock's discussion of Zuni oral storytelling in *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*. In every Zuni household, writes Tedlock, there is at least one parent or grandparent who knows how to interpret the [Creation story]. I say "interpretation" partly because these are not fixed texts. The stresses, pitches, pauses, and also the *sheer words*, are different from one interpreter to the next, and even from one occasion to the next, according to the place and time, according to who is in the audience, according to what they do or do not already know, according to what questions they may have been asked. . . . We are in the presence of a *performing art*, all right, but we are getting the *criticism* at the same time and from the same person. (236)

⁹A. Irvin Hallowell explains that in Chippewa (Ojibwa) culture, a "balance, a sense of proportion must be maintained in all interpersonal relations and activities. Hoarding, or any manifestation of greed, is discountenanced" (172). Even overfasting for spiritual knowledge, notes Hallowell, is judged to be "as greedy as hoarding" (173).

¹⁰Pauline's equation of both Fleur and Nanapush with the lake monster and

her resolve to "transfix [them] with the cross" (200) is highly ironic considering that once she determines that "Christ had hidden out of frailty, overcome by the glitter of copper scales, appalled at the creature's unwinding length and luxury" (195), *she* becomes the serpent. "It was I with the cunning of serpents" (T 195), she brags; and, after she plunges her arms into Nanapush's kettle of boiling water (to melt her windigo heart, perhaps?), she "[sheds] a skin" (T 195). Since, as Selwyn Dewdney observes, the Chippewa's lake monster was often described as a "sinister lion" (39, 122) and Pauline herself notes that Missepeshu takes the "body of a lion" (T 11), it is exceedingly appropriate that her name be changed to "Sister Leopolda." For discussion of Sister Leopolda's fight with the devil/windigo/Missepeshu for control of Marie Kashpaw's heart in *Love Medicine*, see Helen Jaskoski (54-59).

¹¹In "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View," A. Irving Hallowell explains that "Manitou" or "manitu" is generally considered a synonym for a person of the "other-than-human" class. Citing the field work of Paul Radin and John M. Cooper, he asserts that the Manitou were never thought of as impersonal, supernatural, universal beings but rather as supernatural personal beings who displayed the characteristic of beings who were able to transform themselves into other forms. Whether human or animal in form or name, these characters behaved like people, though many of their activities are depicted in a spatiotemporal framework of cosmic, rather than mundane, dimensions. The Manitou frequently interacted with human beings and liked to be talked about, so they often came to listen to the tales being told about them. Sometimes called "our grandfathers," these characters were generous and given to sharing their power with human beings.

¹²According to Gerald Vizenor, the Chippewa are also called the Ojibwa but are more correctly called Anishinabeg, which is a collective name referring to those who speak the same woodland language (13).

¹³See Arnold Krupat's discussion in "Post-Structuralism and Oral Literature," of "high" and "low" as virtual synonyms for the terms textuality and orality (113-14).

¹⁴In *Ceremony*, Leslie Silko writes: "I will tell you something about stories, . . . / They aren't just entertainment. / Don't be fooled. / They are all we have, you see, / all we have to fight off / illness and death" (2).

¹⁵Here, I echo Elaine Jahner who states that "Momaday's journey to Rainy Mountain uses no language we ordinarily deem theoretical; nevertheless, a realized theoretical stance is implicit in it. In its structure and content it illustrates a traditional mode of textual interpretation. It examines the possibilities of transferring that mode from oral to written texts" (163).

¹⁶This is the point that Susan Scarberry-García makes about Momaday's incorporation of the "beauty, design and vitality" of Navaho and Kiowa stories into his novel, *House Made of Dawn* (71).

¹⁷I would like to thank Kathleen Donovan for her valuable suggestions for revision.

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**WOMAN LOOKING:
REVIS(ION)ING PAULINE'S SUBJECT POSITION
IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *TRACKS***

Daniel Cornell

I

Readers of Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* are familiar with the character of Sister Leopolda, a reclusive nun engaged in a battle for control, both physical and psychological, with Marie, a young girl who has come to join the convent. Marie says that she is drawn to Sister Leopolda because they share a capacity for the uncanny and an interest in the work of Satan:

I had this confidence in Leopolda. She was different. The other Sisters had long ago gone blank and given up on Satan. He slept for them. They never noticed his comings and goings. But Leopolda kept track of him and knew his habits, minds he burrowed in, deep spaces where he hid.
(*Love Medicine* 42-43)

To rid Marie of Satan's influence, Sister Leopolda engages in grotesque disciplines. She throws an oak pole over Marie's head and skewers a boot in the coat closet where both of them believe Satan to be hiding. She then locks a terrified Marie up in the closet, leaving the girl to wonder if she will be the oak pole's next victim. When Marie comes to join the convent, Sister Leopolda scalds her with boiling water from a tea kettle and then tenderly smooths salve on the very burns that she has inflicted. Ironically, after Sister Leopolda stabs Marie's hand with a hot poker, the other sisters believe the wound to be a stigmata, and Marie uses the ruse to escape from Sister Leopolda's influence.

Later, after Marie has married Nector Kashpaw, the tribal chairman, she returns to visit a dying Sister Leopolda and discovers that the battle between the two women has only been dormant throughout the years. Marie kneels before Sister Leopolda to receive a blessing:

But it was not the right hand of her blessing she lifted. It was the other hand, the left hand, still gripping the iron spoon. The hand went up. *Our eyesights locked*. She lifted half out of bed, with her deathly strength, to give herself the leverage she needed to connect a heavy blow.

I went up with her, *drawn by her gaze*, knowing her intention as if she spoke it. The arm smacked down, but I somehow had grasped her wrist, and now we leaned into each other, balanced by hate. (*Love Medicine* 121; emphasis mine)

Until her death, Sister Leopolda controls others through the power of her disturbing gaze. Even when she beats her metal spoon against the bed irons, Sister Leopolda's conduct is as much an obsession with control as it is evidence of insanity. Although Marie asserts that in the last years of Sister Leopolda's life "there had been a drastic disarrangement of her mind" (*Love Medicine* 112), insanity is not a sufficient explanation for Sister Leopolda or her power. But without an account of the history that takes Sister Leopolda to the convent, the reader has few clues to construct an explanation.

In her 1988 novel, *Tracks*, Erdrich presents the history that precedes *Love Medicine*. Through two narratives that alternate in time and point of view, Erdrich recounts the displacement from native lands, the extensive kinship networks, and the internecine struggles of the Chippewa people. One account is given by Nanapush, who represents himself as a clever leader of the tribe, situated between his Chippewa traditions and the U.S. governmental exploitation of American Indian peoples. At one point he says: "I had a Jesuit education in the halls of Saint John before I ran back to the woods and forgot all my prayers" (*Tracks* 33).¹ The other narrative is given by Pauline, a mixed breed whose convent aspirations are realized at the novel's conclusion when she becomes the Sister Leopolda of *Love Medicine*.

As a reader who had already encountered Pauline as Sister Leopolda in *Love Medicine*, I was ready to read *Tracks* for the insight it would shed on her disturbed psychology. And in fact, such an interpretation is easy to find. She concludes her narratives in *Tracks* with the explanation that she has been telling her version of the events in order to explain why her soul is purified and ready to receive convent vows:

I believe that the monster was tamed that night, sent to the bottom of the lake and chained there by my deed. For it is said that a surveyor's crew arrived at the turnoff to Matchimanito in a rattling truck, and set to measuring. Surely that was the work of Christ's hand. I see farther, anticipate more than I've heard. The land will be sold and divided. Fleur's cabin will tumble into the ground and be covered by leaves. The place will be haunted I suppose, but no one will have ears sharp enough to hear the Pillagers' low voices, or the vision clear to see their still shadows. The trembling old fools with their conjuring tricks will die off and the young, like Lulu and Nector, return from the government schools blinded and deafened. (204)

Conflating American Indian and Judeo-Christian religious traditions, Pauline sees herself as a visionary savior, the carrier of an understanding not available to those who have accepted the blindness and deafness

of a literal experience cut off from the symbolic. In her mind, Misshepeshu, the Chippewa spirit of Lake Matchimanito, is identical to the Christian devil, who is to be chained and thrown into the lake of fire. The temptation for the reader is to understand Pauline's construction of her activity on the lake as evidence of insanity, to understand it as another example, like her refusal to experience the "pleasure" of feces or urine elimination more than once a day, as a misguided syncretism of American Indian and Christian religious traditions.

Additionally, the reader attempting to construct a single, unified point of view must ask how it is possible for Pauline to be narrating these events from her position of final mental disintegration at the novel's conclusion when she appears sane in the earlier parts of her narrative. In *Nanapush*, Erdrich presents the reader with a point of view that appears to contrast with Pauline's by its very stability. His narrative becomes the interpretive grid against which the reader evaluates Pauline, and in his judgment she is not trustworthy:

She [Pauline] was, to my mind, an unknown mixture of ingredients, like pale bannock that sagged or hardened. We never knew what to call her, or where she fit or how to think when she was around. So we tried to ignore her, and that worked as long as she was quiet. But she was different once her mouth opened and she started to wag her tongue. She was worse than a Nanapush, in fact. For while I was careful with my known facts, she was given to improving truth.

Because she was unnoticeable, homely if it must be said, Pauline schemed to gain attention by telling odd tales that created damage. There was some question if she wasn't afflicted, touched in the mind. Her Aunt Regina, who was married to a Dutchman, sent the girl back here when she got peculiar, blacked out and couldn't sleep, saw things that weren't in the room. That is all to say that the only people who believed Pauline's stories were the ones who loved the dirt. But of those there are no shortage. (38-39)

According to *Nanapush*, the reader who accepts Pauline's account is merely a lover of dirt. Thus Erdrich implicates her readers in an objectification of Pauline if they accept *Nanapush's* point of view as the literal ground from which to reconstruct Pauline's narrative.

However, there is another interpretation of the character of Pauline if the power relations in the novel are examined. These power relations point to the close relation between racism and sexism that according to Trinh T. Minh-ha is authorized by imposing a dominant Euroamerican point of view:

The pitting of anti-racist and anti-sexist struggles against one another allows some vocal fighters to dismiss blatantly the existence of either racism or sexism within their lines of action, as if oppression only comes in separate, monolithic form. Thus, to understand how pervasively dominance operates via the concept of hegemony or of absent totality in plurality is to understand that the work of decolonization will have to continue within the women's movements. (104)

If the power relations between Nanapush and Pauline are examined in light of gender, Pauline becomes more than the neurotic wallflower Nanapush represents her as, embraiding lies to compensate for her lack of sexual appeal. Rather, she takes up a position that in a male authored order belongs solely to men: she demands the equality of a constituting gaze, the privilege of being a constitutive subject. It is not lies that she constructs but her own right to look. In the process she reveals the sexual politics within Nanapush's narrative discourse.

II

In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault uses insanity to explain how the relations between subjectivity and power construct ideological control through the operation of a discourse regime. Insanity becomes the "other," the absence of reason, the definition of what must be resisted because it is lack, the negation of what is:

For madness, if it is nothing, can manifest itself only by departing from itself, by assuming an appearance in the order of reason and thus becoming the contrary of itself. Which illuminates the paradoxes of the classical experience: madness is always absent, in perpetual retreat where it is inaccessible. . . . All that madness can say of itself is merely reason, though it is itself the negation of reason. In short, *a rational hold over madness is always possible and necessary, to the very degree that madness is nonreason.* (Foucault 107; his emphasis)

The definition of unreason—the sum of madness—is not unreason at all, but the excess of reason: "Unreason is in the same relation to reason as dazzlement to the brightness of daylight itself" (109). To be labeled "mad," says Foucault, is to have crossed the boundary where reason may no longer be applied. Insanity is "other" because it has been substituted for something absent, a lack that is unthinkable.

Teresa de Lauretis, in *The Technology of Gender*, has applied a psychoanalytic reading to Foucault's understanding of the power-knowledge relation established by discourse regimes. She asserts that

the notion of gender as equal to sexual difference, which is implicit in Foucault, "keeps feminist thinking bound to the terms of Western patriarchy itself, contained within the frame of a conceptual opposition that is 'always already' inscribed" (1). A male/female difference erases the multiple, contradicted self that opens the gap to female/female difference and to the subject position of women themselves: "In other words, female sexuality has been defined both in contrast and in relation to the male" (14). De Lauretis is attempting to liberate the understanding of gender from the construction imposed by a patriarchal discourse regime in order to demonstrate that alterity exists within women's experience: she rejects the use of women as a designation for the second term of some universal opposition.

The reader who attempts to make sense out of Pauline's point of view by reference to Nanapush's mastering narrative, which explains her as insane, makes her into the representation of non-logic. However, it is not the absence of logic she exhibits. Rather, she reveals how the extra-textual reality where readers position themselves in order to legitimize their view of the world denies Pauline her own subjectivity. To accept Nanapush's point of view as the truth about Pauline is to accept the cultural consensus imposed by representational systems that only admit one vision.

The ambiguity created in the gap between the narratives offered by Pauline and by Nanapush reminds the reader that there is no one point of view from which the representation of events can be mastered. Craig Owens identifies this inability to master events from a single point of view as the basis of postmodernism (58). The modernist objectification of art as the product of an individual consciousness legitimizes narrative sequence as a representation of experience, but postmodernism has created a crisis of narrative because "it demonstrates that no one narrative can possibly account for all aspects of human experience" (Owens 64). Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Shelagh Young's essay in *The Female Gaze* applies Owens' insight to the feminist movement:

The myth of the 'real' feminist, the notion that there could possibly be a single feminist subjectivity, a single feminist gaze or project equally valid for all women, has been exploded. The surfacing of feminist 'others' within feminist discourse has inevitably resulted in our having to acknowledge more than one feminist subject position. . . . Feminism is but one of many discursive practices which, according to Foucault, offer a number of subject positions from which it is possible for a specific individual to speak, to write, to think or to direct their gaze. (182)

Young also points to the close relation between racism and sexism implicit in the suppression of difference when a meta-narrative masters experience. She critiques those who fail "to acknowledge that the postmodern crisis concerns the cultural authority of the West and that it stems as much from political initiatives originating in the Third World as it does from feminist interventions in Europe and the USA" (186-87). In this sense she is echoing Paula Gunn Allen's insistence that patriarchal and imperialist understandings are mutually constructed through discourse (Allen 222-26).

III

Early in *Tracks* Erdrich represents how Pauline feels her subject position to be erased when she characterizes herself as a literal absence: "I was fifteen, alone, and so poor-looking I was invisible to most customers and to the men in the shop" (19). While Fleur is busy at cards, tricking the men in the back room of the store out of their entire week's wages, Pauline explains how complete she understands her absence to be:

I put the coins on her [Fleur's] palm and then I melted back to nothing, part of the walls and tables, twined close with Russell. It wasn't long before I understood something that I didn't know then. The men would not have seen me no matter what I did, how I moved. (19-20).

It is Pauline's feeling of invisibility, her very absence, that Erdrich explores by giving Pauline a narrative voice. The men in the store erase Pauline's presence because she does not fit the representation of "woman" that has been constituted by their male-gendered vision.

In a system where woman is defined in terms of male desire Pauline is found lacking: what she has to offer men is outside their construction of woman and so she says they do not see her. In this she contrasts with Fleur, who is the ultimate representation of male desire, regardless of whether the men are Euroamerican or American Indian. Fleur's sexual presence, as Pauline describes it, is all the more visible because it fulfills male expectations:

[I]t was clear that Misshepeshu, the water man, the monster, wanted her for himself. He's a devil, that one, love hungry with desire and maddened for the touch of young girls, the strong and daring especially, the ones like Fleur. (11)

Pauline goes on to describe this monster of desire as beautiful and seductive but ultimately destructive:

Our mothers warn us that we'll think he's handsome, for he appears with green eyes, copper skin, a mouth tender as a child's. But if you fall into his arms, he sprouts horns, fangs, claws, fins. His feet are joined as one and his skin, brass scales, rings to the touch. You're fascinated, cannot move. He casts a shell necklace at your feet, weeps gleaming chips that harden into mica on your breasts. He holds you under. Then he takes the body of a lion, a fat brown worm, or a familiar man. (11)

Male desire is a monster in her eyes, and its representation by the phallus is clear in the linguistic equation of "lion," "fat brown worm," and "familiar man."

Only those women like Fleur, who can outwit masculine desire by seduction, are granted any sexuality within the mastery of a male vision. Female sexuality, when defined as the object of desire, is denied the possibility of being a constituter of desire. Women, then, may seduce in this phallic dominated system of representation, but they may not desire. When Pauline attempts to engage Napoleon sexually, she violates this principle of male sexual privilege:

With my clothes gone, I saw all the bones pushing at my flesh. I tried to shut my eyes, but couldn't keep them closed, feeling that if I did not hold his gaze *he could look at me any way he wanted*. (73; emphasis added)

Because she meets his gaze, resisting his attempt to look at her as he wants, Pauline refuses to allow Napoleon to create of her an abstraction.² Significantly, in resisting this objectification, she also earns his scorn, and he breaks off the sexual encounter:

So we pressed together with our eyes open, staring like adversaries, but we did not go through with it after all. He stopped for some reason, nothing we said or did, but like a dog sensing the presence of a tasteless poison in its food. (73)

Having failed to fulfill her desire with Napoleon, Pauline turns her attention to Fleur and Eli: "Now that I understood the way things happened with a man and woman, now that I knew it would not happen to me, I tried to warm my hands at the fire between them" (75). But when Eli catches Pauline "looking" at him with desire, he, too, rejects her:

And it was there, while Fleur and Lulu were inside the house fetching flour, that I put out my hand and let it glide against him. My knuckles grazed an inch of his skin. Then

he caught my palm in his. For a moment I thought, with wild certainty, that he would hold my fingers to his lips. But he looked at my hand with curiosity, no intent, and then, like a fish too small to keep, he threw it back. (77)

At this point in the novel Pauline decides to use her cousin Sophie who, like Fleur, represents the sexual lack that fulfills male desire in exactly the ways unavailable to Pauline. Through Sophie, Pauline constructs an elaborate "love medicine" plan to "seduce" Eli and to gratify her sexual desires voyeuristically.

IV

It is through the voyeurism in Pauline's narrative, especially the sexual voyeurism imposed by her unattractiveness, that the reader most clearly experiences her point of view as insanity. She is, she confides, all "angles and sharp edges, a girl of bent tin" (71). In her jealousy over the love between Eli and Fleur, Pauline seeks a substitute body in her young cousin Sophie. Instructing Sophie in the use of a Pillager love medicine, Pauline encourages her seduction of Eli. When her scheming results in a passionate and torrid sexual encounter between Sophie and Eli in the lake, Pauline believes herself actually to be orchestrating the sex between the lovers. Her voyeurism so completely takes hold of her that Pauline experiences Sophie's pleasure at Eli's touch:

I turned my thoughts on the girl and entered her and made her do what she could never have dreamed of herself. I stood her in the broken straws and she stepped over Eli, one leg on either side of his chest. Standing there she slowly hiked her skirt.

. . . She shivered and I dug my fingers through the tough claws of sumac, through the wood-sod, clutched bark, shrank backward into her pleasure.

. . . They went on and they went 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 know how long, how many hours. . . . I was pitiless. They were mechanical things, toys, dolls wound past their limits. (83-84)

Pauline's visual act continues after the event as well. She informs on the pair and has the satisfaction of watching yet again, this time as Fleur scorns Eli and as Sophie kneels transfixed in his yard. The story then becomes simultaneously tragic and extremely comic: Clarence,

seeking to aid his sister and to revenge her violation by Eli, steals the statue of the Virgin from the convent and runs through the forest with it to Sophie in the hope that its presence will accomplish some sort of miracle. He is pursued the entire way by Sister St. Anne, dressed in full habit, crashing through the trees in an attempt to recover the sacred icon.

In the midst of all the commotion surrounding the statue of the Virgin, a miracle does happen according to Pauline: she calls it "my private miracle." The statue weeps; however, no one else sees it because, says Pauline, they are too busy with Sophie's condition and Clarence's theft to notice. Pauline's miracle is a visionary act, and the skeptical reader can provide a rational explanation for the tears. Through a discussion about Sophie the reader understands that Pauline's visionary "miracle" of the Virgin's tears is her reinterpretation of the snow falling on the statue:

[The Virgin] wept a hail of rain from Her wide brown eyes. Her tears froze to hard drops, stuck invisibly in the corners of Her mouth, formed a transparent glaze along Her column throat, rolled down the stiff folds of Her gown and struck the poised snake. It was then that the commotion took place, not over the statue's tears, which no one else noticed, but over Sophie, who tried to rise but could not, as her knees were horribly locked, who fell sprawled in the new snow. (94)

When Pauline attempts to make sense out of the Virgin's tears, they become a sign of her own psychological projections. As Craig Owens has written in his essay on the male gaze and feminine art and discourse, any representation that makes sense of the world through a visual projection guarantees meaning will be determined by the subject position.³ When Pauline bestows meaning on the events, the reader must choose what to accept. A skeptical reading that understands Pauline's perception of the tearful Virgin as a projection denies her the possibility of taking up a visual subject position. However, Pauline's understanding moves beyond projection to empathy as she meditates on the meaning of her vision in religious terms:⁴

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

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

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

Thus, the reader is confronted with an ambiguity. Is Pauline's point of view that of an insane person or is she uncovering a deep religious truth? Or both? Either construction provides a seemingly rational explanation for the experience of this woman who has taken up the visual position of the voyeur. Further, the question opens up a gap in the reader's understanding of Pauline's insanity: it frustrates any attempt to consider her insanity as merely an issue of characterization. True, from the point of view of Nanapush, insanity is integral to her character, but it is also a frustration for the reader who is looking for a place from which to construct a unified narrative story out of the novel's multiple discourses. Catherine Rainwater has identified the use of "conflicting cultural codes to which the reader must respond" as the primary thematic and structural feature of Erdrich's texts (407). She argues that any reader who attempts "to decide upon an unambiguous, epistemologically consistent interpretive framework" will be forced to consider the impossibility of such a position.⁵

What emerges from Pauline's narrative, then, is her insistence that she be allowed a male privilege: to look. Because she does not conform to the feminine image that is the object of male desire, Pauline asserts her identity in the only terms possible, by becoming a constituting subject herself. The constitutive female subject is the absence at the center of a discourse that sees Pauline's voyeurism as insanity. It is not that Pauline does not see clearly, but rather that she insists on seeing at all, that exposes the phallic center of visual representation: the eye objectifies and masters its subject. In other words, the act of looking creates an object that is already inscribed within the masculine desire for objectivity and mastery. Although represented as the image of invisibility, Pauline, by looking, renders visible an ideology that participates in "the *masculinity* of the look, the ways in which it objectifies and masters" (Owens 77).

In the novel's conclusion, Pauline goes out to Lake Matchimanito to defeat the lake monster, Misshepesu, and the system of male desire he represents. When she confronts him, she is not an object, a

representation of the lack he desires, but an equal subject: they meet as god to god:

I tumbled forward when the boat slammed on shore, scrambled upright on the balls of my feet, ready and strong as a young man. My unshorn hair lifted and fell about my shoulders, and all through me I felt the rocking of the lake.

"Show yourself!" I challenged.

And he did, having crawled from the water to confront me in that place. He reared, dropped a blanket set with mud. The fire glared into my eyes and the heat from his body flooded me. . . . I felt his breath, a thin stream that swept along my collarbone and my throat as we crushed close. And then I seized him and forced myself upon him, grew around him like the earth around a root, held him still. (201-02)

It is entirely appropriate, therefore, that Pauline's triumph over Misshepesu is a triumph over the man who resisted her gaze: "the thing grew a human shape, one that I recognized in gradual stages. Eventually, it took on the physical form of Napoleon Morrissey" (202-03).

If the reader allows Pauline to speak for herself—and resists interpreting her speech through the dualistic distinction between literal and figurative vision that Nanapush's narrative of her authorizes—then the murder of Napoleon coincides with the defeat of Misshepesu just as Pauline claims. In representing male desire as the false god who must be mastered, Pauline confronts it as one constituting subject to another. It is Pauline's taking up of a masculine visual position that is untenable within a male-centered order. But the very sign of that presence is erased by her religious discourse, here no less than when she observes the Virgin's tears. Dismissing Pauline's point of view as merely insane allows Erdrich's readers to abandon the search for Pauline's narrative position before recognizing that it is in plain sight.⁶

V

Even more significantly, to designate Pauline's voyeurism as the vision of an insane "other" is to assign it a meaning that is based in an absence. As Terry Eagleton has explained the concept from Derrida: "meaning is not immediately *present* in a sign. Since the meaning of a sign is a matter of what the sign is *not*, its meaning is always in some sense absent from it too" (128). Further, the trace of what is not may be found both in its replacements and displacements. As a replacement for the visual privilege of the feminine constituting subject, Pauline's insanity allows for a displacement of the masculine fear of impotence

before feminine sexual desire.

Throughout the novel men consider Fleur wild, undomesticated, even though they find her desirable. With the exception of Nanapush, who had saved her life, all the men who come into direct contact with Fleur experience death or some destructive fate. When Eli says that he desires her, Nanapush warns him: "Go town way and find yourself a tamed woman" (45). But when Eli insists, asking for a "love medicine," Nanapush reveals that he too sees with the sexual privilege of a male bias:

It struck me that he [Eli] had come into his growth, and who was I to hold him back from going to a Pillager, since someone had to, since the whole tribe had got to thinking that she couldn't be left alone out there, a woman gone wild, striking down whatever got into her path. People said that she had to be harnessed. Maybe, I thought, Eli was the young man to do it. (45)

Yet, as Arnold Krupat has explained in his study of American Indian narrative, the post-structuralist reading of Saussure reminds us that organizing the field of meaning by oppositional relations is too simplistic. Krupat, recalling what Saussure said of language, points out that oppositional terms "name no positive quantities we can stabilize as oppositions available for choice, but only systems of differential relations" (120). To recognize that Pauline's insanity may be a displacement of male fears about female sexuality is to recognize as well the possibility that she represents the sign of a male projection over fears about impotence, both literal and figurative, that has been rendered absent in Nanapush's discourse.

Nanapush brags tediously about his love-making abilities, especially his ability to satisfy three wives. But Nanapush's narratives, filled with glorifications of his sexual prowess, seem overly confident, especially in light of his relationship with Margaret Kashpaw, with whom he carries on a ribald debate about his potency:

"Old man," she scorned, "two wrinkled berries and a twig."
"A twig can grow," I offered.
"But only in the spring." (48)

Much of the comic humor in the novel involves this representation of the most serious conflicts through the material level of bodily functions, which is characteristic of the carnivalesque nature of the trickster (Bakhtin 88-94; Allen 97). But Nanapush's verbal defeat is lighthearted when compared to his failure to protect Margaret from being tied and shaven bald by their enemies. His literal impotence sexually is linked

directly to a more figurative impotence of power:

"Strike!" she goaded. "Next time the snow thaws I'll be in town, telling how poor Nanapush has lost the use of every other stick, except his cane!"

"Liar!" I put my arm down. "I've exhausted you, admit the truth."

"I've fallen asleep," she said, "if that's what you mean."

I went too far then. "A prickly-headed woman takes what she can find!"

Her eyes darkened with victory. I'd left an opening for her knife. She first threw down the blankets and the shawls, treasures from my past. Then she reminded me of who was tied beside her, helplessly, who watched as Lazarre stropped his razor. She reminded me of how I lost the respect of others, lost my manhood, of how fortunate I was to have a woman who would overlook such shame.

I turned away. (126-127)

Nanapush, reminded of how vain is any boast about sexual potency in light of his inability to defend Margaret's person, discovers in a weakened dream state that his larger fears involve an inability to defend his American Indian heritage. The dream reveals that in his subconscious are feelings of impotence when faced with the destruction of his heritage.

. . . Then one day I could not rise from my blankets, my limbs weak as water, and I dreamed the dream I had in those days after my family was taken.

I stood in a birch forest of tall straight trees. I was one among many in a shelter of strength and beauty. Suddenly, a loud report, thunder, and they toppled down like matchsticks, all flattened around me in an instant. (127)

At the very beginning of the novel, Nanapush fatalistically tells Fleur that it is useless to try to save the land: "'The land will go,' I told her. 'The land will be sold and measured'"(8). In the final chapter as the land is indeed lost, Nanapush admits his impotence before the power of the United States government. He cannot save his heritage or even continue its existence for future generations of Chippewa in this place. Nanapush writes:

I heard the hum of a thousand conversations. Not only the birds and small animals, but the spirits in the western stands had been forced together. The shadows of the trees were crowded with their forms. The twigs spun independently of wind, vibrating like small voices. I stopped, stood among

these trees whose flesh was so much older than ours, and it was then that my relatives and friends took final leave, abandoned me to the living. (220)

Like the rest of his tribe, Nanapush becomes the object of a powerful bureaucracy that he cannot resist:

. . . [O]nce 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. That's when I began to see what we were becoming, and the years have borne me out: a tribe of file cabinets and triplicates, a tribe of singlespace documents, directives, policy. A tribe of pressed trees. A tribe of chicken-scratch that can be scattered by a wind, diminished to ashes by one struck match. (225)

There is a clear indictment of the United States government's appropriation of American Indian lands in the story Louise Erdrich narrates in *Tracks*. But it is the impotence imposed by the privileged vision within a symbolic order of the phallus that positions Nanapush and his tribe as the objects of another historical narrative. It also authorizes the sexism that is an integral part of that narrative history. At the end of the novel, Fleur achieves a psychological victory over the logging company, but it is a victory that Nanapush represents as a noble failure. Although Fleur manages to have the satisfaction of terrifying the loggers, entrapping them in the trees as she cuts down the forest around her house, her victory is pyrrhic: The trees still fall and she must move. Even as Fleur tries to hold on to Misshepesu and her Chippewa identity, taking the "weed-wrapped stones from the lake-bottom" (224), Nanapush predicts her loss of power amongst Euroamerican institutions:

I stood in the middle of the path. I watched her until the road bent, traveling south to widen, flatten, and eventually in its course meet with government school, depots, stores, the plotted squares of farms. (224)

Fleur has no where to go where she will not already be positioned as "other," both as a woman and as an American Indian. By recognizing how Pauline's experience of feminine desire has been mastered through a discourse of insanity, the reader of *Tracks* can begin to resist the power relations that reduce all non-phallogocentric subject positions to the status of a single "other."

NOTES

¹Quotations from Louise Erdrich come from *Tracks* unless otherwise indicated.

²Laura Mulvey is the genesis for much of the psychoanalytic criticism equating "the gaze" with masculine principles of representation. Hélène Cixous uses almost this exact language to discuss the resistance of a phallogocentric system to accept a woman's gaze: ". . . she has been made to see (= not-see) woman on the basis of what man wants to see of her, which is to say, almost nothing" (68). "Man's dream," according to Cixous, is an "absent, hence desirable, a dependent nonentity, hence adorable. Because she isn't there where she is. As long as she isn't where she is. How he looks at her then! When her eyes are closed, when he completely understands her, when he catches on and she is no more than this shape made for him: a body caught in his gaze" (67). According to Cixous all male myths say to women: "There is no place for your desire in our affairs of State" (67).

³Owens bases his claim on Heidegger's explanation of the modern world as represented—as picture—and therefore a visual projection (66).

⁴As the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* have explained, the capacity for empathy is more central to the way that women know, and empathy is based in reception rather than projection (Belenky 122).

⁵Rainwater locates these conflicting cultural codes in *Tracks* as operating through the distinction between Pauline's Judeo-Christian discourse and Nanapush's Native American discourse. I am arguing that the conflict exists within each of their discourses as well.

⁶Both Roland Barthes and, more recently, Teresa de Lauretis have made similar claims for the phallic dimension of traditional narrative: Barthes says that it provides its readers with "an Oedipal pleasure . . . a staging of the (absent, hidden, or hypostatized) father" (10). In *Alice Doesn't*, De Lauretis argues that "each reader—male or female—is constrained and defined within the two positions of a sexual difference thus conceived: male-hero-human, on the side of the subject; and female-obstacle-boundary-space, on the other" (121).

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COMMENTARY

ASAIL at MLA 1991

The annual business meeting of The Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures was held at the MLA convention in San Francisco on December 29, 1991.

The first order of business was the treasurer's report submitted by Elizabeth McDade. On the basis of current information, it appears that ASAIL will have an end-of-year balance of about \$1600. The projection for 1992 is hopeful: our new dues structure will quite likely provide funds adequate to produce and distribute both *SAIL* and *ASAIL Notes* while also leaving a modest amount for additional projects we might want to undertake.

Old business included two brief reports:

1. ASAIL's members approved the new by-laws by mail ballot in March, 1991.

2. We are continuing our efforts to complete incorporation.

The first piece of new business was to elect new officers. The officers-elect are:

Hertha Wong, President

Gretchen Ronnow, Vice President

Elizabeth McDade, Treasurer

Toby Langen, Secretary.

With much regret, I announced Helen Jaskoski's intention to resign as co-editor of *SAIL*. ASAIL owes her much gratitude for her many contributions, among them her role in improving the quality of our journal. Professor Jaskoski will continue as co-editor until her replacement is named. She reported that issues for the next few years are planned or "in the works." Also, the co-editors have applied for a grant to publish the writers participating in Joseph Bruchac's colloquium "Returning the Gift."

Toby Langen reported on the sessions she is organizing for ASAIL at the 1992 American Literature Association convention.

There was also lengthy discussion among those present about possible session topics and related activities for the 1992 MLA convention. There seemed to be agreement that our activities should be positive and celebratory in character, for in spite of the many losses Native Americans have experienced since the post-Columbian European invasion, Native American cultures are by no means dead.

The question of whether non-members should receive *ASAIL Notes* was discussed. The consensus seemed to be that the mailing list should be as inclusive as is consistent with the organization's well-being.

Those present expressed confidence in the Executive Board's ability to resolve the issue by establishing a policy (subject to periodic review).

An even more important issue facing ASAIL in 1992 is that the MLA Program Committee will be reviewing ASAIL's allied organization status in May. We will be required to submit the following information for the review:

1. a brief history, including a self-evaluation and description of programs at MLA;
2. evidence of on-going activity (e.g. publications, regular communication to members;
3. evidence that we have involved a diverse portion of membership in our activities (including convention programs);
4. a statement of the organization's purpose and date founded;
5. a copy of by-laws showing date adopted;
6. current membership numbers and a sample membership application.

Finally, approval was expressed for a suggestion that a directory of Native American studies programs be compiled under the auspices of ASAIL.

Franchot Ballinger

From the Editors

We open the new year and new volume on a note of continuity: the four articles in this issue continue the focus on works by Louise Erdrich begun in the last issue. All four contributors offer close studies of individual works, and three of the papers pay special attention to that most trying of Erdrich's creations, Pauline Puyat, aka Sister Leopolda. Her peculiar combination of pitifulness and strength make Pauline as vexatious and as fascinating as Olive Chancellor in *The Bostonians*; the two are genuine soul sisters, and placing these characters and their stories "in dialogue" is one indication of just how impressively Louise Erdrich—still a young writer—has enriched and altered the whole body of American literature.

We are happy to report that four people have already responded generously to our appeal for donations to support the publication of proceedings from "Returning the Gift." More on this project appears below in the item "Opportunity for Benefactors." So many people express admiration, interest and even "identification" with Native American culture: this is an excellent opportunity for expression of such support in a specific, material way.

The summer/fall 1992 issue of *SAIL* will be a double issue devoted

to the topic of Early Written Literature by Native American writers. The issue includes some previously unpublished and reprinted texts as well as articles on Mayan and Latin (yes!) texts, Samson Occom, Alice Callahan, Charles Eastman, Alexander Posey, Mourning Dove and D'Arcy McNickle. Subscribers and others wishing to obtain extra copies of this issue (Volume 4 number 2/3) should write to Elizabeth McDade at the subscription address to inquire about cost and deadline for prepaid orders.

Helen Jaskoski
Robert M. Nelson

New Editor Search

SAIL is seeking a new editor to replace Helen Jaskoski, beginning in 1993. The ASAIL Board of Directors especially encourages American Indian scholars to consider applying. Qualifications include previous editorial experience and institutional or other independent support. Interested persons are invited to write or call Helen Jaskoski (714-449-7039) for more detailed information about the job.

Applications (letter and curriculum vitae) should be sent to the President of ASAIL:

Hertha Wong
Ethnic Studies Department
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720.

Opportunity for Benefactors

Readers and subscribers of *SAIL* are invited to become benefactors for the special issue of *SAIL* that will publish proceedings of the "Returning the Gift" conference. The proceedings will include symposium transcripts, position papers, creative work in fiction, poetry, drama and non-fiction prose. We hope to upgrade our production with photographs and offset printing in order to provide the best medium possible for this important publication. This issue of *SAIL* is expected to set the agenda for Native North American contributions to literature and literary study for the opening of the next century. We invite you to become a part of this important undertaking by contributing as a benefactor to the initiative. We have made a grant proposal to the National Endowment for the Arts to support the project; to be eligible for the grant, we must raise a minimum of \$2000 in matching funds. We hope to find at least 20 people who can be generous enough to

make donations of \$100 to *SAIL* for this special issue. If you can contribute, we welcome your gift. If you are able to help other benefactors reach us, we hope you will do so. Contributions of all benefactors will be recognized in the issue.

Checks should be made to *SAIL*/1992 and sent to Helen Jaskoski, Department of English, California State University, Fullerton, CA 92634.

Call for Papers: ASAIL at ALA

The American Literature Association has generously made room in their annual conference program for five ASAIL sessions, all scheduled for the same day. This means that ASAIL will have what amounts to a one-day mini-conference, with the added advantage of making our presentations available to other ALA conference-goers.

The ALA conference takes place at the end of May in San Diego, and all present and potential members of ASAIL are specially invited to attend and participate. If you wish to present a paper, be a chair or respondent in a panel, or just want more information, contact

Toby Langen
1102 North 46th Street
Seattle, WA 98103

Call for Papers: ASAIL at MLA 1992

ASAIL will have two sessions at the 1992 MLA in New York. Topics for the two sessions are open. Any subjects are welcome, including papers on literature written in tribal languages, sex and gender issues in American Indian literature, and gay/lesbian issues in American Indian literature.

Please send proposals and/or completed papers to

Hertha Wong
Department of Ethnic Studies
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720.

Deadline: March 15.

Call for Papers on Critical Approaches

Greg Sarris is preparing an issue of *SAIL* focusing on critical approaches to American Indian Literatures. He welcomes contributions on the following topics:

- * Approaches to oral literatures
- * Approaches to written works by American Indian authors
- * Critical theory and approaches to American Indian literatures
- * Issues of multiculturalism in American Indian literatures

Deadline for submission of papers: June 1, 1992.

Send all materials to

Greg Sarris
 Department of English
 UCLA
 Los Angeles, CA 90024

Call for Papers on Feminist and Post-Colonial Approaches to American Indian Literatures

A forthcoming issue of *SAIL*, guest-edited by Dr. Susan Gardner, will focus on feminist and post-colonial approaches to literature as applied to American Indian literatures: at what points may these approaches intersect and affect each other? Since a number of non-Indians came to their interest in American Indian literatures via concern and involvement in women's or worldwide indigenous people's issues, the aim of this number of *SAIL* will be to explore the usefulness of studying American Indian literatures from these perspectives. Although we are looking for papers focusing on pedagogical applications of these various methodologies, theoretical papers are also welcome.

For further information, please contact Susan Gardner, English Dept., Univ. of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC 28223; phone (704) 547 4208; FAX (704) 547 4888; e-mail to fen00sjg @ unccvm.bitnet.

Call for Papers: New Directions in Contemporary American Indian Film, Drama, and Theater

In popular culture and imagination, Native Americans seem to cycle in and out of fashion once each generation, each peak of popularity provoked, or at least accompanied, by a singular and often Anglo effort: *A Century of Dishonor* and the "Red Progressive" movement; the Meriam Report and the New Deal for Indians; *House Made of Dawn* and the Native American Renaissance; the rediscovery of *Black Elk Speaks* and proto-New Age shamanism. Recently, this phenomenon has evinced itself again—*Dances With Wolves* and America's rediscovery

ered cinematographic romance with Native peoples. Quickly, a theatrical revival: *Son of the Morning Star*, *Black Robe*, and a rush of others; the entertainment pages of the Sunday newspaper list dozens of Indian films in various stages of production.

Hollywood—the movies, Film—has always been a prime source of widespread misconceptions and stereotypes, perhaps in America more influential, for good or ill, than any other creative or expressive medium, and now all cameras are trained on American Indians. Significantly, much scholarship, criticism, and theory has been directed toward the literary genre of Drama, of which Film has become an accepted and seriously examined mode. As an incarnation of ritual, and arguably the first human aesthetic expression, Drama has a uniquely central position in most Native cultures, making any consideration of Indian Film and Theater particularly multifaceted.

This special issue of *SAIL* seeks inquiries and essays that consider what has, what is continuing, and what will happen post-*Dances*, exploring not only the cultural implications but the literary, cultural, and theoretical dimensions of what may prove to be a paradigm shift in the ways American Indians see themselves and are seen in several dramatic media. Interdisciplinary and innovative approaches are particularly encouraged.

Deadline: January 1993.

Call for Papers: MLA Discussion Group

The topic for the 1992 Session of the Discussion Group on American Indian Literatures is "Cultural Sovereignty: Tribal Voices and Critical Approaches." Contributors are invited to submit papers on any subject related to these broad issues. Please send proposals to

Kathryn Shanley
Department of English (GN-30)
Seattle, Wa 98195.

Deadline: March 31.

New Anthology of Translations

Brian Swann is preparing an anthology/reader showcasing the best contemporary translations of North American Native literatures. Prospective contributors are asked to contact him with a proposal by February 1, 1992; deadline for completed contributions is October 31, 1992, with publication in 1993. Contact: Brian Swann, The Cooper Union, Cooper Square, New York, New York 10003-7183; phone 212-353-4272; FAX 212-353-4398.

The Rupert Costo Chair

The University of California at Riverside hosts the endowed Rupert Costo Chair in American Indian History. The Chairholder may be from any of the disciplines in Education, the Humanities, the Natural Sciences, the Social Sciences or the Fine Arts. Appointment is normally for a period of one or two years. Under special circumstances an appointment of shorter duration may be considered, but a two-year appointment is preferred. Applicants and nominees must be distinguished in American Indian affairs and have a distinct record of scholarship within or outside academia.

It is anticipated that the Chairholder will give lectures and seminars, do scholarly research and disseminate such findings while in residence. The appointee will also be expected to communicate with or visit other institutions and Indian communities of Southern California. The Chairholder will have only those administrative responsibilities directly related to the Chair.

There are thirty-five Indian tribes within two hours of Riverside. The University of California campuses at Los Angeles, Irvine, San Diego, the University of Southern California, the Claremont Colleges, the Huntington Library, the San Diego Museum of Man and other noteworthy museums, libraries and institutions are all within 100 miles of Riverside.

Salary is commensurate with personal experience and qualifications, and the endowment will provide for academic, research, and administrative costs.

For information about the next application cycle, contact

Professor Sylvia Broadbent, Chair
Search Committee
Rupert Costo Chair in American Indian History
Office of the Chancellor
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, California 92521

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REVIEWS

***Raven Tells Stories: An Anthology of Alaskan Native Writing.* Ed.**

Joseph Bruchac. Greenfield Center, NY: The Greenfield Review Press, 1991. \$12.95 paper, 224 pp., ISBN 0-912678-80-1.

Teachers of Native American literatures should be pleased with this new anthology featuring the works of 23 Alaskan Native writers. It brings together some of the more established writers such as Mary TallMountain, Fred Bigjim and Nora Marks Dauenhauer, while introducing readers to promising new voices. Included is a selection of poetry, essays, and plays which exhibit a range and variety of talents. The collection should be welcomed by educators who want to incorporate more work from Alaskan Natives into their courses.

Fred Bigjim's essay, "Developing Alaskan Native Humanistic Themes," aptly argues that an interdisciplinary approach to Native studies needs to be brought into universities, which will benefit both Natives and nonNatives alike. He says that we need to encourage the discussion of Native philosophies and to develop courses that would inspire Native and non-Native exchanges of views. Through this, students could come to understand the legitimacy and authenticity of Native cultures, which could be coupled with a greater emphasis on the legitimacy and authenticity of all cultures as they relate to the humanities (17). This anthology would prove useful in initiating that project as it could be used to stimulate dialogue about the diversity and richness of Alaskan Native cultures.

Writers from Athabascan, Aleut, Inupiat and Tlingit tribes are well represented here, offering their own particular perspectives. Love of the land is clearly evident in many of the pieces. Rose Atuk Fosdick's work captures succinctly the sights and sounds of the country surrounding Nome; Robert Davis evokes the "lowtide odors, sulfur, clams, kelpbed" (62) of Southeast Alaska's damp shorelines. Other writers speak of rapid cultural change and its impact on Native lives. Frederick Paul writes of the origin of the land claims movement, and Sherman Sumdum laments the rise of corporations at the expense of traditional subsistence activities.

These writers are keenly aware of the past, both as a source of pain and of strength; loss and destruction have not destroyed their spirit. Pride in heritage is joined with a steadfast belief in the endurance of the land and its people. With assurance, Diane Benson concludes her poem, "Hostage to the Past":

The notion we had vanished

at last.
Indigenous strong.
Even with the slaughter of the Amazon.
Sparkles of past knowledge cling
to the trunks of our being
as long as one person stands
with Grandmother watching. (13)

This anthology stands not only as testimony to the survival of Alaskan Natives, but also to the flourishing of Alaskan Native literary talent. I hope the book finds its way into many classrooms.

Jeane Coburn Breinig

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Keepers of the Earth: Native American Stories and Environmental Activities for Children. Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac. Foreword by N. Scott Momaday. Golden, CO: Fulcrum, Inc., 1989. \$19.95, 209 pp., ISBN 1-55591-027-0.

Michael Caduto and Joseph Bruchac, with a little help from some friends, have put together a marvelous book which should be a required text in America's schools. It is hard to overstate the contribution this volume could make to science and environmental education, especially on the 4-8 grade levels.

What they have done is to integrate sound instructional practices with a Native approach and point of view toward the environment and, not so strangely, the two mesh perfectly. Unlike the typical practice which splits story and myth from science, Caduto and Bruchac make strong connections between these two ways of apprehending the world and show that they may not be so dichotomous after all.

Their goal is not to criticize the present state of science and environmental education, but to offer an alternative, to realign human value and meaning with scientific discovery and knowledge. As they state in their introduction:

This is a book about living, learning, and caring: a collection of carefully chosen North American Indian stories and hands-on activities that promote understanding and appreciation of, empathy for, and responsible action toward the Earth, including its people. (xxiii)

The key here is "hands-on," for the authors present over sixty lessons for students which make for active inquiry and learning, learning by observation and doing. (It's a good thing that Indians read John Dewey!) They want students to literally go out into the field . . . and the rivers, ponds, shorelines, and forests. Students are urged to observe, write, sit, listen, gather, but with the concept that they are visitors in Nature, and must treat the land and its inhabitants with respect.

What makes the book so strong is the connection of these activities to a wide range of Native stories from across the continent. The twenty-three stories they offer represent nations from all four directions and are grouped in ten major categories, such as "Creation," "Wind and Weather," "Plants and Animals," and "Life, Death, Spirit." A particular story, or set of stories, opens a chapter, like "The Hero Twins and the Swallower of Clouds" (Zuni) or "Manabozho and the Maple Trees" (Anishinabe); this is followed by a discussion of the story, which usually makes a bridge to the overall chapter topic. There are also some questions about the story and, to close the chapter, the student activities. Each chapter is a self-contained unit, and teachers can select the ones most appropriate for them.

Since this is a book on the environment, many of the activities, such as some on marine life, will be usable only at accessible sites. However, others are adaptable to any situation. Teachers in urban settings will be somewhat limited in using the activities, but can still modify some of them for their locales or make them research-based. (An interesting companion volume to this one could be on environmental activities for city kids.) And users of *Keepers of the Earth* might wish for an appendix of addresses for sources of further materials or information on a topic. However, these minor concerns are overshadowed by the breadth of the stories and activities in the book.

Although *Keepers of the Earth* is aimed at science teachers, those in literature and reading need not despair. A separate volume of the stories from the text is available under the title *Native American Stories*, as is an audio cassette of the stories read by Joseph Bruchac.

Keepers of the Earth closes with an essay by Bruchac, "Thanking the Birds: Native American Upbringing and the Natural World," in which he relates a story about Gluscabi, the Abenaki transformer hero. In the story, Gluscabi obtains a magical game bag which will stretch to accommodate all the animals he can find. He succeeds in tricking all the animals into the bag, and proclaims to his grandmother that they no longer need to hunt; they can simply reach into the bag to get what they want. The story concludes:

But his grandmother shakes her head. "Animals cannot live in a game bag," she says. "And what about our children and our children's children? If we eat all the animals now, what will they have to eat?"

Gluscabi realizes the error of his ways and releases the animals back into the forest. This book will go a long way in allowing *our* children and our children's children to make the right choices about the planet and all who live on it.

Larry Abbott

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The Lightning Within: An Anthology of Contemporary American Indian Fiction. Ed. Alan R. Velie. Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 1991. Cloth, ISBN 0-8032-4659-5.

The Lightning Within is a difficult volume to review because all of the pieces found here are so familiar. Anyone who has followed fiction by American Indian authors for any time will recognize every one of these stories and excerpts. The fiction Alan Velie has collected here is all first rate work, and perhaps that is a justification for collecting chestnuts. A reader will open this volume to find some very fine lightning, such as Gerald Vizenor's typically brilliant and startling "Luminous Thighs" (one of the freshest fictions here) or Simon Ortiz's splendid "Men on the Moon." That same reader will encounter N. Scott Momaday's Tosamah, the most famous pan-Indian trickster-preacher in American literature, and Louise Erdrich's Lipsha Morrissey, lonesome for love and identity, preparing to deal himself a royal flush of a family. Other gems are Leslie Marmon Silko's wonderful story "The Man to Send Rain Clouds," as well as her lyrical, revisionist piece, "A Geronimo Story," and well chosen excerpts from James Welch's *Fools Crow* and Michael Dorris's *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*.

Though it may be all too familiar to many of us, this is all good stuff, great stuff, and Velie has done a fine job especially for all those teachers out there who are searching for short pieces they can teach in short classes. As Velie says in his impressively brief introduction, we can hope that readers who like this collection "will want to seek out other works" by these writers and "move on to other sorts of Indian writing." Velie adds correctly, "Indians are producing some of the best

writing in America today."

N. Scott Momaday won a well deserved Pulitzer Prize for Tosa-mah's story and the rest of *House Made of Dawn* nearly a quarter of a century ago, and he won acclaim for Tosamah's story—sans Tosamah—again in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* about the same time. Louise Erdrich's and Michael Dorris's works have been best sellers on the front shelves of bookstores all over the country for most of the last decade. In 1854, the publisher of Cherokee author John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta* announced in the book's preface that "the aboriginal race has produced great warriors, and powerful orators, but literary men—only a few." More than a century later, a member of the Pulitzer jury declared that an award to the author of *House Made of Dawn* might be considered a recognition of "the arrival on the American literary scene of a matured, sophisticated literary artist from the original Americans." In such discourse, smacking as it does of patronizing authority, the journey from "aboriginal" to "original" is not long. The fact that in 1991 a collection of "contemporary" American Indian short fictions must recycle much of its contents out of well known novels—and materials decades old—underscores the extreme difficulty members of the "aboriginal race" still have in being heard as "sophisticated literary artist[s]" way out on the periphery of American culture. Unless one is already in New York, it can take a very long time indeed for one's voice to reach that privileged, Euramerican, "literary scene."

Today there is a new generation of young Indian writers coming into their own, discovering their own voices in writing programs at universities such as Cornell and New Mexico, Washington and Arizona, in pueblos and on reservations and in urban centers all over the country. Though *The Lightning Within* contains undeniably splendid fiction—and though university presses such as Nebraska and Oklahoma are doing heroic work to bring such writing to light—this anthology also strikes me as a luminous sign of the enormous obstacles Indian writers still confront in having their voices heard. Let us hope that the next collection of "contemporary" Indian fiction will include different voices and be truly new and contemporaneous.

Louis Owens

* * * *

***Our Bit of Truth: An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature.* Ed.**

Agnes Grant. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Pemmican Publications, Inc., 1990. \$19.95 paper, 347 pp., ISBN 0-921827-10-5.

When well compiled, literature anthologies are useful teaching resources. Students read them to gain immediate access to a sample of some identifiable body of literature or to help fill a specific void or gap in the literary canon. By definition, well-compiled anthologies cover a range of authors and works in a manner which entices readers to look further, to go beyond the anthologized selections to more in-depth treatment. *Our Bit of Truth* is a well compiled anthology because it is useful to both teachers and students. It presents a sample of the literature composed by Native Canadians, a literature to this point in time largely unread and unknown. Agnes Grant has taken great care to present a representative sample of Native Canadian literary forms, themes, tribal and regional affiliations of authors and gender perspectives.

The anthology includes several works of various genres, both oral and written. Grant, like those who describe and critique U.S. American Indian literature, includes examples of major oral literary genres—myths, legends, traditional poetry, and memoirs. She does an excellent job of expanding the typical treatment of these genres. Like American Indians' music, not all Native Canadian music is ceremonial. Consider three short selections from the anthology:

They Say I Loved Her (Bella Coola)

They say I loved her dearly?
No!
The dimple in my left cheek
Merely had a good opinion of her. (109)

Cradle Song for a Boy (Tlingit)

Let me shoot a small bird for my younger brother.
Let me spear a trout for my sister. (113)

Paddle Song (Ojibway)

Throughout the night
awake am I,
throughout the night
awake am I,
upon the river
awake am I. (117)

The inclusion of love songs, lullabies and songs about everyday activities helps to create for teachers and students a more complete picture of Native Canadian life and oral literature. More specifically, this treatment underscores the diversity of experiences conveyed through the works of all Native North American authors.

This picture of the Native Canadian and Native American literary experience becomes even more complete as *Our Bit of Truth* includes selections from five written genres including biography, autobiography, short stories, novels, and poetry. Unlike other anthologies, this one contains excerpts from several (five) novels. These selections ". . . are so diverse that no definition of a 'typical' Native novel can be developed. The stories reflect the diversity of lifestyles, geography, social conditions, and social change" (254). Like the anthology itself, these excerpts offer readers enough to make them want to read more. The unique life stories and reflections of Native Canadians such as Edward Ahenakew (Cree) and Eleanor Brass (Cree-Salteaux), when joined with those of Black Elk, Delfina Cuero, Emerson Blackhorse Mitchell, and N. Scott Momaday (among many other American Indians), create a mosaic of the Native North American experience; individual works, independent and distinct, possess unity when viewed collectively.

Native Canadian writers, like American Indian authors, express "culture specific" or endemic themes. In "The Geese Over the City," Emma LaRocque (Metis) contemplates her personal identity amidst conflicting ways of life.

In the city
one awakes to the sound
of man-made mobility:
 coughing motors,
 clanging truck boxes,
 wailing sirens,
 tire screeches.
There are treadmarks on my soul.
...
Twice more
The Geese
went over the city
making me sad
that I could not see
that there was much Cree in me
despite
town height. (341, 343)

Native Canadian authors write of universal themes as well. Sheila Erickson's (Cree) command of rhythm and tone, reminiscent of Gwendolyn Brooks in "We Real Cool," enhances her poetic treatment of the theme of technology in "My Camera."

my camera catch the light
freeze the flow
one sixtieth of a second it can capture
one sixty-thousandth I can know
my camera stop your walking
my camera freeze your feet
I dig my artsy pictures
I think my camera neat. (322)

A weakness of the anthology is that Grant, in her brief introductory sections to the oral literary genres, does not discuss the messy issue of translator/transcriber intrusion on Native Canadian oral literature. Readers must accept as accurate many non-Native translations and transcriptions of Native Canadian oral literatures. Since this part of the Native Canadian experience parallels to a great degree the U.S. American Indian experience, readers are left with too much to accept blindly. However, because it presents new voices and attitudes, and because it presents a balanced treatment of genres, styles, authors' tribal and regional affiliations, and gender perspectives, *Our Bit of Truth* is a useful work, a significant contribution to the fields of world literature, Canadian literature, and Native North American literatures.

Jim Charles

* * * *

The Heirs of Columbus. Gerald Vizenor. Hanover and London: Wesleyan U P, University Press of New England, 1991. \$18.95 cloth, 188 pp., ISBN 0-8195-5241-0.

Gerald Vizenor is unique. I can think of no contemporary who writes in a similar manner; parallels are easier found in writers like the more eccentric of the Renaissance philosophers. A passage like the following, for instance, might have struck a chord with Sir Thomas Browne:

Her hands were wild, an immortal silence that burst in a blue radiance; the decks were blue, touchwood from the

headwaters. The naked men on shore waved to the hand talker; two became puppets, and others were arboreal. Stone was blue in his dream and roamed in a white robe near the mangroves on the coast. The masts of the flagship and caravels were brushed by great golden birds. Samana brushed the decks; the sensuous rounds of her golden thighs bruised the memories of the tormented crew on the Santa Maria. (39-40)

The writing is as condensed as a sonnet, and—once unpacked—as resonant. Samana is a New World lover(?) of Columbus; the headwaters refers to the source of the Mississippi, once flowing through immensely rich forests and now the site of a stone tavern on a reservation where a group of tribal Heirs of Columbus gather to relate "stories in the blood"; Stone Columbus is sometimes the operator of a barge anchored between the Canadian/US border offering tax-exempt bingo games, and sometimes a talk-show radio host broadcasting tribal healing stories; Stone Columbus also alludes to Naanaboza the Trickster's brother, called Flint or Stone Boy in the traditional stories.

The color blue permeates the book, particularly in blue hands often mentioned, and most meaningfully in the description of a "son-et-lumiere" produced by another character, Almost Browne, "a crossblood who was born in the backseat of a hatchback on a cold and lonesome road to the reservation; he was banished once from the reservation because his laser holotropes, the peace medal transmutations, luminous presidents, and the icewoman terrified tribal families one night" (61). The description of Browne's laser-light-show merges within a single epiphanic moment the apparition of Columbus's caravels and the bingo barge, which become to the delight and wonderment of the watching heirs, "luminous sovereign states in the night sky, the first maritime reservation on a laser anchor" (62). But why blue hands? And what are hand talkers? The latter phrase carries many associations—puppeteer; sign languages, which are codified by deaf people now and were a means of communication among north American first nations; dancers of Polynesia and Indonesia (where Columbus was headed). None of these meanings is suggested for the phrase, yet it recurs throughout the book, tantalizing in unexplained allusiveness.

The laser-light-show passage epitomizes *The Heirs of Columbus* in being a brilliant, self-contained moment hard to fix within a coherent narrative. Another such moment, actually extended through several chapters, occurs in a tent-shaking ritual conducted by a graduate student in a museum vault and designed to recover stolen artifacts. The subsequent trial (after the crime has been stolen, as a hapless police officer laments) continues the splendid hilarity. The whole sequence

cries out for filmic treatment.

If it were possible to categorize Vizenor, his title would be philosopher first—at least in the most recent works—and then novelist or poet. Narrative in works like *The Heirs of Columbus* operates to serve speculative play; it is not a ground out of which ideas emerge, but a framework for their presentation. More and more, Vizenor ornaments his books with epigraphs from wide reading, intertextual in-jokes, allusive weights and even epilogue source-lists. A passage from Sartre opens *The Heirs of Columbus*, and the epilogue cites an eclectic and fascinating reading list on history, religion, science and theory. In this kind of writing we sense characters functioning more as vehicles for positions or possibilities, rather than coming to life as complex individuals with inner lives and personal histories.

A look at the philosophy embodied in works like *The Heirs of Columbus* shows it to be above all provisional in nature. "Terminal creeds" receive Vizenor's scorn in many of his works, and conversely the Trickster, whose being is ever provisional, contingent, and metamorphic, engages and fascinates him. But accepting provisionality as principle is a contradiction: to say "there are no absolutes" is to affirm an absolute, while to suggest a provisional formulation ("maybe there are some absolutes?") moves toward inanity. This contradiction vibrates at the heart of *The Heirs of Columbus* (and other works), and accounts, I think, for its self-reflexive, self-conscious self-subversion: no position can be at the center of the discourse, no character—not excluding the supposedly omniscient narrative voice—can have more than momentary, provisional credibility.

In her review of *The Heirs of Columbus* Elizabeth Cook-Lynn advises, "If you must read a book on Columbus during this commemorative period, this is the one" (*Los Angeles Times Book Review* 8 September 1991: 12). Columbus is only a pretext, though: this book is most of all a meditation on notions of "heirship" (an idea that has engaged Vizenor's imagination of late, as evidenced in his renaming *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* with the new title of *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*). Part of the mix is Vizenor's on-going discourse on the meaning of being "crossblood"—a term he prefers consistently to "mixed-blood" and one which seems to convey more complexity in its implications of moving oppositionally as well as back and forth, of an integrated whole, even of religious and emotional significances. "Blood," however, is only one part of the equation. Inheritance claims based on blood and descent contradict the idea of an invented self which is one of the many facets of the polyvalent trickster character. Vizenor embodies this contradiction: he values and reveres a tribal life idealized with compassion, loyalty, connection and mystery, yet he is

also an heir of the Western enlightenment, committed to analysis, detachment, individual development and liberty. Indeed, to identify a set of values or a stance as "tribal" is to stand outside that ground, to take the outsider's perspective, just as critique of the coldness of the rationalist position requires ability to intuit and feel ("to be cold and lonesome is to be woundable" [93]).

A good deal of *The Heirs of Columbus* explores the tension between self-definition and freely undertaken commitment on the one hand, and historical and physical determinants on the other. Of course, the approach is never head-on, but made in typical Vizenor fashion, a dance or a game played between two or more sides with complicated and mutating rules. Some of the game is played out in rarefied in-jokes and allusions, like the discussion of a valuable copy of Arnold Krupat's *The Voice in the Margin* that has been owned and annotated by Scott Momaday. Elsewhere, the narrator builds elaborate schemata of extended conceits, like the Dorado Genome Pavilion where Doctor Pir Cantrip, exobiologist turned genetic engineer, has "isolated the genetic code of tribal survivance and radiance, that native signature of seventeen mitochondrial genes that could reverse human mutations, nurture shamanic resurrection, heal wounded children, and incite parthenogenesis in separatist women" (133). Cantrip's achievement, however, does not supersede the people's memory of "stories in the blood," a phrase that also recurs throughout the book. When science addresses the genetic code, "survivance" is no longer a matter of inheritance, but of intellectual manipulation. There are no genes for "race," and the concept deconstructs as one more fiction available for pernicious misunderstanding.

This is not an easy book, and certainly not accessible as a sustained whole on a first reading. There is no single character that draws the reader into the narration, like the engaging personality of the Clement Beaulieu character in *Wordarrows*, no compelling focus like the splendid antics of Griever in *Griever: An American Monkey King in China*. The satire casts a wide net, from the far-ranging and historical, encompassing Columbus, the religious politics of fifteenth-century Spain, and Pocahontas, to the intricacies of reservation and lit-crit politics. "Brilliant but uneven" would be an easy label to affix at this point, but it leaves out far too much of what is most humane, gentle, good-humored and still sharply pointed in the satire. Yet one more Renaissance philosopher comes to mind as an enlightening parallel, another satirist, Erasmus of Rotterdam: *The Heirs of Columbus* stands as the latest chapter of Gerald Vizenor's ongoing series *In Praise of Folly*.

Helen Jaskoski

Briefly Noted

Thompson, J. Eric. *A Catalog of Maya Hieroglyphs* (U of Oklahoma P). This book was originally published in 1962, and Thompson died in 1975. It seems that the University of Oklahoma Press has issued a paperback reprint to take advantage of the current wave of interest in Mayan studies. However, Thompson's work predates all the more recent advances in Mayan glyph decipherment; and in fact Thompson, in his day, denied that such decipherment would ever be possible. The glyphic records with which Thompson was concerned were almost entirely astronomical observations.

William Bright

From the University of Oklahoma Press comes an invaluable resource guide: *American Indian Resource Materials in the Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma*, edited by Donald L. DeWitt. Besides describing 269 manuscript collections, almost 100 photograph archives and over 500 newspaper collections, this guide lists an extensive oral history collection on audiotape and an impressive collection of items on microfilm. Some 1056 separate collections are listed and annotated in sections written by the five contributors. The guide indicates what a rich source the University of Oklahoma library is for scholars working in any area of American Indian studies.

Some Kind of Power: Navajo Children's Skinwalker Narratives by Margaret K. Brady with foreword by Barre Toelken (University of Utah, 1984) is still in print. This book offers important commentary on analysis of oral narratives in cultural, psychological and performance context.

University of Nebraska Press has reissued in its Bison paperback series James R. Walker's *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, edited by Raymond J. DeMallie and Elaine Jahner. In addition to the wealth of Lakota myth and ritual practices in the original publication, the authors include a discussion of important recently published materials relating to Lakota theology.

Also from University of Nebraska in its paperback Bison series is a reprint of Jane Holden Kelley's *Yaqui Women: Contemporary Life Histories*, first published in 1978. In third-person narration Kelley

summarizes the information about their lives provided by the Yaqui women she lived with over a period of years. The book is an interesting contrast to life histories formulated as first-person narratives.

Another reprint comes from Ohio University Press, which has brought out a hardcover edition of William Brandon's *The Magic World: American Indian Songs and Poems*, first published in 1971. Individual texts, successfully edited and "adapted" to achieve the editor's goal of "readable poetry," are presented without contextual information regarding performance, collection, translation or their place in the cultures from which they come.

Helen Jaskoski

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CONTRIBUTORS

Larry Abbot is a middle school language arts and reading specialist in Vermont, and also teaches at the Community College of Vermont in Middlebury. He is completing a book of interviews with contemporary Native artists entitled *I Stand in the Center of the Good*.

Jeane Coburn Breinig is a graduate student enrolled in the University of Washington's Ph.D. program in English. Her focus is American and Native American Literatures, especially oral narratives. She is an Alaska Native, Haida tribe, born and raised in Ketchikan and Kasaan Alaska.

Jim Charles, associate professor of English Education at the University of South Carolina at Spartanburg, participates in and has been a student of Ponca American Indian culture since 1972. Topics he researches and writes on include Ponca songs, American Indian literatures, and the treatment of American Indian literatures in textbooks.

Joni Adamson Clarke is pursuing a Ph.D. in American literature at the University of Arizona. Her paper "The Emergent Quality of Experience: Framing the World with Stories," which describes her experience using Native American narratives in a writing class for Native American freshmen, was presented at the 1991 ALA Conference in Washington, D.C.

Daniel Cornell, Associate Professor of English at Biola University, has published on multiculturalism, Lacan, metaphor, and Wendell Berry, and has given papers on gender at the American Culture Association. He was Fulbright Lecturer in Portugal (1988-89), and is recipient of a PEW Foundation grant to develop a program in Ethics-Across-the-Curriculum.

Helen Jaskoski writes fiction, poetry and articles on American literature and poetry therapy.

Norval Morriseau is a Canadian Ojibwa visual artist and writer. His paintings were first exhibited through the support of Jackson Pollock; his book, *Legends of My People the Great Ojibway*, collects stories and illustrations inspired by lore learned from his grandfather and encountered in the writer-artist's own dreams.

Louis Owens, of Choctaw, Cherokee, and Irish-American descent, is professor of literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He is co-editor of *American Literary Scholarship: An Annual*; forthcoming works include novels, *Wolfsong* (West End, 1991) and *The Sharpest*

Sight (Oklahoma, 1992), and a critical study, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Oklahoma, 1992).

Lissa Schneider is a doctoral candidate in English literature at the University of Miami and teaches women's studies courses. Her paper "*Love Medicine: A Metaphor for Forgiveness*" was originally presented at the conference on "Literature and Addiction" in April 1991 at the University of Sheffield, Sheffield, England.

Annette Van Dyke is Director of Women's Studies at Denison University, where she teaches a Native American women writers course. Her forthcoming book from New York University Press, *The Search for a Woman-Centered Spirituality*, considers the work of Leslie Marmon Silko and Paula Gunn Allen in the context of contemporary women's spirituality.