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Ojibwa Identity in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*

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Letter of Recommendation

Mr. Debendra Rawat has thesis entitled Ojibwa Identity in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* under my supervision. He carried out his research from July, 2015 A.D. to February, 2016 A.D. I hereby recommend his thesis be submitted for viva-voce.

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Approval Letter

This thesis entitled Ojibwa Identity in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* by Mr. Debendra Rawat submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, has been approved by the undersigned members of the research committee.

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Abstract

The present thesis entitled tries to understand Native American Ojibwa cultural tradition. Erdrich traces the cultural legacy that is passed from generation to generation. Oral traditions, naming tradition, use of characters of trickster are some of the characteristic features of Ojibwa heritage. Respect for ecology that focuses on community and nature is a source of personal and collective energy, identity and values. The thesis also makes the point that *Love Medicine* highlights significant differences between Native American and Euro-Americans cultural traditions. Erdrich applies the bead imagery to express the idea of multicultural society and its inherent overlapping spaces and intermingling colours. The new pattern of modern society does not displace Ojibwa heritage and the past. Erdrich dramatizes a vast web of interdependence brought about by the intersection of many cultures and heritages.

Ojibwa Identity in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*

Louise Erdrich writes about mixed-blood Native Americans in the twentieth century, a period in which the United States government attempted to essentially eradicate Native American culture and the Native American population was decimated due to disease, loss of land, and starvation, after the arrival of white settlers and missionaries and the implementation of policies such as allotment. Her characters cope with the cultural, spiritual, and financial repercussions of these losses, often not fully realized how they have been affected. Her work appeals to mainstream readers and critics, as well as both non-Native and Native American scholars, because of her vibrant writing and also because her characters are resilient when faced with great loss.

Erdrich is half Native American and half German-American and a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwa, but she resists being considered solely a Native American author. She addresses the issue in an interview with Hearth Wong " Interview with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris" : she doesn't "really like labels. While it is certainly true that a good part of my background…and a lot of the themes are native American, I prefer to simply be a writer" (107). Still, she seems to retain a responsibility to her fellow native Americans, In her oft-quoted essay:

> Where I Ought to be: A writer's sense of place," she writes that contemporary native American writers have a task quite different from that of other writers I've mentioned. In the light of enormous loss, they must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of the catastrophe. (48)

In the early 90s, when she had published the first three novels of a planned tetralogy, Louis Owens attributed Erdrich's mainstream popularity to the fact that she did "not ignore the racism and brutality of Euramerica's dealings with Indian people, but for the first time in a novel by a Native American author, she makes the universality of Indian lives and tragedies easily accessible to non-Indian readers" (205). Eleven novels later, her works are still widely read by both mainstream readers and scholars, and she has received numerous awards, including the National Book Award in 2012. Her work speaks to both native and non-native readers because many of the stories can be interpreted using the reader's own cultural code. This dichotomy is deceptive, however, because the effect of these multiple layers should be to disorient the reader in order to allow the reader to share the characters' experiences. Catharine Rainwater suggests that the effect of the "conflicting codes" at play in Erdrich's work is alienating to the reader " and thus underscores Erdrich's primary theme" (164). Other scholars have argued that Erdrich's ability to reach both native and non-native readers have a mediating effect between cultures. James Ruppert says that in order to both "protect and celebrate" the Native culture, as Erdrich has stated she intends to do with her writing, she

> must mediate between two conceptual frameworks, non-Native and Native, in order to avoid future catastrophes. She endeavors to manipulate each audience so that it will experience the novel through the paths of understanding unique to each culture, thus assuring protection and continuance of a newly appreciated and experienced Native American epistemological reality. (67)

The conflicting cultural codes are a very real part of the modern native American's life but readers who have some knowledge of native cultural, as well as the corresponding

Eurocentric with a narrower worldview. This openness of her work to multiple interpretations reflects the hybridized nature of her characters' lives. For example, in the opening chapter of *Love Medicine,* June feels alienation, approaching schizophrenia, her loss of a centered identity (195). To a native reader, however, it might represent "the necessary annihilation of the self that prefigures healing and wholeness and a return to the tribal community [that] often takes the form of physical fragmentation" (Owens 195). The use of what Rainwater calls "conflicting codes"(123) reflects the way that Native Americans, often with mixed-blood, straddle native and non-native worlds in order to form a complete identity. For readers who are not already familiar with native American customs, myths, and traditions, a deeper understanding of the characters and the culture the Erdrich writes about can be achieved by reading Erdrich's other novels.

Love Medicine (1984) is a novel composed of "chapters "that combine to tell a coherent story, but many of the chapters stand alone as short stories and were originally published as such. The stories are significantly revised by the time they are included in a longer work, and they become integral parts of a larger narrative. The events in *love Medicine* have lasting effect on the emotional and spiritual lives of the characters, often whether they realize it or not. *Love Medicine* describes the experiences and relationships of several families throughout the twentieth century on a fictional reservation in North Dakota, which is "solidly based on the facts of the Chippewa Indians of the Turtle Mountain reservation" (Maristuen-Rodakowski 15) . *Love Medicine* emphasizes the "anguish of lost communal/tribal identity and the heroic efforts of a fragmented community to hold on to what is left" (Owens 194).

One of the policies most detrimental to the native American population was the general allotment Act of 1887, or Dawes Act, often just referred to as "allotment"

in Erdrich's novels. In "Re/creating the past: Anishinabe History in the Novels of Louise Erdrich," Margaret Huettl states that this policy cost all Indian nations a combined ninety million acres as white settlers and loggers gained control of their land(165). Between allotment and the Burk Act (1906), which cut the period of time that the land was held in trust before it could be sold due to unpaid taxes or fees, these policies "initiated a cycle of land loss that continued unabated through the middle of the twentieth century" (Huettl 35).

Although the goal of government policy was to transform native Americans into farmers and landowners, allotment not only contributed to the loss of Chippewa land, but it also changed the relationships among the people in the tribe. Dividing the land into individually owned pieces of property altered the dynamic among tribal members and thus affected Chippewa identity: emphasis shifted from the shared needs and values of the community to the self-interest of each individual (Berninghausen 199). Furthermore, between 1912 and 1924, the superintendent of the reservation, Stephen Janus, advocated bypassing the trust period and issuing "patents-in-fee simple to eligible tribal members" (Beninghausen 200). One they owned the land outright, circumstances often compelled them to sell the land to non-Native settlers. Government officials like Janus promoted the idea that hard work and property ownership would lead to assimilation, which such promoters viewed as the "salvation" of Native Americans. As Berninghausen notes, "the use of the term 'salvation' suggests that allotment was conceived of as a not altogether secularized version of missionary work, the federal government's companion plan to the catholic church's attempt to convert the Chippewa" (200). These two avenues of assimilation – government policies and Catholicism – combined to ensure cultural annihilation.

Missionaries first came to North Dakota and the Great Lakes area in the seventeenth century. By the early nineteenth century they had established schools and convents in order to "save" Indian souls (Maristuen-Rodakowski 19). The cultures were so different that missionaries around the Great Lakes had "Little success at first because of a monumental lack of understanding between converters and potential convertees". Like many other colonizing explores and missionaries before them, since the Jesuit missionaries could not understand the spiritual practices of the Native Americans, "they concluded that these people were too primitive to have a religion and that, spiritually speaking, they were empty containers waiting to be filled" .Because of white settlers encroaching on their land, "the native people realized that the most basic aspects of their world, which had remained constant for thousands of years, were permanently being altered". Many Native Americans became practicing Catholics, in part because change seemed inevitable, and in part because some of the spiritual practices made sense and were integrated into the shamanic tradition. The transformation from traditional beliefs to Catholicism as an integral part of Chippewa life was "accelerated by the government's practice of forcibly removing Chippewa children form their homes and sending them to boarding schools to be 're-educated' as white people" (Mckinney 156). Due to the presence of catholic missionaries and Native children being sent to government boarding schools, much of the traditional spiritual practice was diluted and many Native languages were lost or are currently in danger of becoming extinct.

In *Love Medicine*, the long-term repercussions of allotment and the catholic influence are played out in the lives of the characters over the latter part of the twentieth century. In "The Beads," Marie no longer prays, but she touches the Cree prayer beads that june wore when she came to live with the kashpaws and imagines

the beads being worn down to nothing at the bottom of the lake (96). In "Plunge of the Brave," Nector describes himself as a stone at the bottom of a river being slowly worn down by time. Although the feeling of being worn down affects many of the characters in *Love Medicine*, they have survived, but continue to struggle with the threats posed by unfair policies, alcohol abuse, and capitalism. In this struggle, some characters are spiritually lost, while others discover the relevance of traditional Chippewa beliefs to life in the twentieth century. For instance, Marie, who once sought acceptance at the convent, spiritually connects with her heritage during the birth of her last baby, and becomes a tribal elder who takes responsibility for holding the community together and preserving the old language and tradition. Her granddaughter Albertine, while watching the northern lights, imagines a dance hall in the sky and know that june "would be dancing if there was dance hall in space". The aura suggests to her that the sky is like "a pattern of nerves and our thoughts and memories traveled across it. As if the sky were one gigantic memory for us all" (37). Although raised catholic, "Albertine's vision is powerful because it reestablishes her sense of connection to her home landscape, to her family…and, importantly, to Chippewa myth" (Smith 75). All Nector and June, who sometime seem estranged from their Chippewa identity, connect to their heritage near the end of their lives.

The characters in *Love Medicine* who have left the reservation are both literally and figuratively distanced themselves from their community and their heritage. They are most in danger of being worn down to nothing. King Kahpaw and Beverly Lamartine are both character who try to assimilate but are failures in the views of both cultures (150). King can't get ahead financially in the white world, and he also fails on Ojibwa terms. This is because his reaction to the death of his mother seems in different. He uses the insurance money that he receives at June's death not to do good for the

community, but to indulge in his personal desire for a new sports car. Beverly fails when he assumes a falsely humble role to succeed in the white world. Beverly has let go of his native American identity so much that he has stopped letting it bother him. He has a longing that he can't quite identify. Instead of reconnecting with the reservation community, he decides to try to take Henry Junior whom he believes to be his biological son, from Lulu. Beverly's success in the white world has cost him a sense of belonging to both the white world and the reservation. When he returns to the reservation to "claim Henry Junior and take him home" (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 109), he feels out of place and uncomfortable around lulu's sons who "had grown into a kind of pack" (118). Beverly's isolation from the reservation community renders him unable to act on his original plan to claim Henry Junior or his revised plan to leave and return home. Instead he marries Lulu, neglecting to tell her he already has a wife. Beverly wants to become part of the pack, and he sees Lulu as a way in, but it's too late for him.

The images in the first section of "The world's Greatest Fishermen" the opening story of *Love Medicine*, the tone is less hopeful, more harsh and ominous, and June's attitude toward her situation is more immediate; there is no indication that she feels connected to the past. An ordinary American woman is "killing time" as she waits for a bus (2). And June remembers another mud engineer she knew who was "killed by a pressurized hose" (3). Her clothes are modern, too. Her jacket is "white vinyl" (4); her pants are made of "stretch fabric" (5) . June is a native American woman in the 1980s on her way home to the reservation where no one expects her. That she walks out into the prairie and dies of exposure implies of exposure implies a loss for all modern native Americans. Nanapush and June Kashpaw are from the same tribe; live on the same land, but in completely different worlds. In June Kashpaw's

world, a connection to the past and to her heritage has been severed by assimilation and the dilution of her culture. However, all is not lost, however. Although June is culturally adrift in life, in death she becomes part of the larger cultural history because she lives on in the stores told by the characters in *Love Medicine*.

Nanapush remembers the old ways, believes in spirits and love medicine, and sees changes in his lifetime, but he also does what he can to preserve land for his people. June is thoroughly of the new world, and represents the culmination of all the changes of the twentieth century. *Love Medicine* begins with June's death and what happens when her family gathers for the first time since her death. *Love Medicine* ends two years later the an it began with Lipsha's return to the reservation in "June's car" (357). Lipsha's return to the reservation from government school at the end of novel allows the novel to end on a hopeful note.

Not every character survives the systematic destruction of Native American culture and community by white people in the early part of the twentieth century with his or her identity intact, but the most successful characters in the novel are those who are able to adapt to the modern world without losing a sense of their heritage. June is a native American woman on her way home to the reservation, but her clothes, her knowledge, and her experience allude to assimilation. But as the rest of the novel shows, assimilation is not an automatic defeat, not for everyone. June may not be thriving, but she is still an Indian. Albertine may look white, but she was raised Indian, as her mother proudly proclaims in "The world's Greatest Fishermen" Lipsha may seem like a weakling compared to king, but he ultimately achieves the strongest connection to his heritage in *Love Medicine*, Lipsha indicates that he will inherit this legacy of balancing resistance and assimilation in order to preserve the culture.

The characters who have the strength to resist assimilation and maintain a connection to their heritage are those who participate in the protection and celebration of the culture. But resistance requires a certain amount of hybridization, and "the locus of hybridist in Erdrich's novels is precisely the resistance of Ojibwa culture to the dominant culture, and, inversely, the ability of the Ojibwa people to adapt the dominant culture" (Barnim 57).

In *Love Medicine*.Erdrich uses water imagery to show both the force of the dominant culture and the strength of Chippewa resistance. She shows the ways characters react to the changing world and the losses their tribe and families experience as this wave of change and disease overtakes them. These characters live in a world in which government policies have interfered with the way they relate to the land, and in which Catholicism has interfered with their religion and their relationship to Native Gods. The water imagery in *Love Medicine* often reflects the ways individuals respond to change outside of their control. The characters represent Native Americans in the twentieth century who could let themselves be worn down liked stones at the bottom of a river, but for the most part do not.

References to water often indicate characters' success in navigating the changing world, such as Lipsha "crossing the water" at the end of *Love Medicine*, or their destruction, such as Henry Junior's death by drowning. Erdrich has said that the image of water in *Love Medicine* is "ultimately a symbol of 'transformation (walking over snow or water)' and 'transcendence.' Because it allows life to go on" Water is both homes" (Gleason 131). In Love Medicine, characters are associated with images related to their status above or below wear, on either boats and bridges, or by drowning and sinking. Erdrich uses the boundary of the water's surface to divide her

characters into those who are secure in their identities and those who struggle to reconcile their heritage with a dominant culture that pushes them toward assimilation.

Love Medicine total assimilation without a strong connection to one's heritage can mean a loss of identity, Historically, the government encouraged policies and practices that attempted to turn Native Americans into “whites’’ by systematically destroying their culture and way of life. Children were sent to boarding schools and punished for speaking their native language. Tribal lands were turned into parcels owned by individuals, undermining the communal culture that had been their way of life for so long. This systematic cultural annihilation led to isolation, identity confusion, and alienation from both the native culture and the mainstream white culture, as well as dissolution of community, *Love Medicine* portrays the repercussions of this tragedy, as well as a sense of hope for recovery of some elements of tribal culture.

Erdrich uses the water imagery in *Love Medicine* to set up a dichotomy between the characters who thrive as Native Americans above water, literally and metaphorically, and those who struggle to maintain a connection to their heritage and exist symbolically below the water's surface, or in some cases literally drown. *Love Medicine* also shows that healing is possible. Several characters leave the reservation and return even more certain of what it means to be a Native American in the twentieth century. The characters who are associated with imagery that places them above the water's surface, either in boats or on bridges, are those who have found a way to preserve their culture for future generations.

Love Medicine deals in depth with the effects of colonization on the Ojibwa people as a community and as individuals. Although her recent work is more politically charged as she portrays the intersection of cultures in the modern justice

system, *Love Medicine* deals with the politics of assimilation and land allotment, but from the point of view of the Ojibwa.

In *Love Medicine*, Erdrich uses multiple narrators to portray the long-term effects of the events. When discussing Love Medicine, scholars tend to focus on the hybridized culture that has resulted from several hundred years of contact between native Americans and Euro-Americans. Euro-American influence on the Native culture was inevitable from first contact, but the spread of disease and the systematic efforts by the government to eliminate the native culture and force the people to assimilate caused a tragedy that Erdrich compares to a nuclear disaster. Modern Native Americans, often of mixed-blood heritage like Erdrich herself, struggle to define their identities and understand their ancestry in light of such enormous loss. Although *Love Medicine* focuses on identity confusion and the struggle to find a place to belong, it also depicts native Americans facing universal human problems and learning to understand the present by making sense of the past.

Erdrich's *Love Medicine* portrays the lives of Native Americans in the twentieth century in a realistic way by including all the complications involved with having a mixed-blood heritage. As H. Wendell Howard points out, Erdrich is "holding onto and setting forth the language that is appropriate to experiences-even conflicting ones-as they are lived by persons of mixed origins….[and] this may be a further example of what Erdrich sees as the chaos of her life but in truth is merely the complexity" (121). On the other hand, Dennis Walsh suggests that Erdrich is "assert[ing] the primacy of Chippewa values over catholic values" and that "religious incorporation seems impossible in *Love Medicine*" (109). I would argue that religious incorporation is inevitable and possibly even necessary. The Catholic influence is ingrained; incorporation is necessary in order to retain what's left of the religion.

Erdrich certainly uses humor to show the spiritual confusion that results in incorporation, such as Lipsha's attempt to get his turkey hearts blessed by a priest, but I don't believe she's asserting one cultural code over the other. The two worlds, Ojibwa and Euro-American, are inextricably linked and have been since the arrival of the first settlers. Survival depends on acceptance of a mixed culture because a return to the way of life that existed before the two cultures met is impossible.

The first water imagery used to chart Marie's journey appears in "Saint Marie", when she neither has a clear sense of herself nor realizes the value of her Ojibwa heritage. In her teens, Marie Lazarre (later Marie Kashpaw) mistakenly seeks her identity and validation through a relationship with the Catholic nuns. The sustained fishing metaphor in "Saint Marie" reflects the title character's movement from ignorant longing for acceptance into Catholicism to profound disillusionment with Sister Leopolda and the convent. Marie claims she does not "have that much Indian blood" and that she wants to "pray as good as they could"(Erdrich,43), so she heads to the convent to prove herself to the nuns. Although Marie does not know that Sister Leapolda, formerly Pauline puyat, is her mother, she is inexplicably drawn to the abusive nun and wants Leopolda to love her. Marie, as the narrator looking back, says of the limits of her knowledge at age fourteen, "the length of the sky is just about the size of my ignorance" (43). Marie's ignorance includes her ignorance of where she came from, which she does not even know she is unaware of, and her uncertainty about where she belongs, which is what she is trying to figure out. Because she longs to find a new home, she chooses the convent because it's the only option she is aware of. References to fish and fishing throughout this story show how Marie is trying to catch Sister Leopolta: she wants the nun’s heart "sometimes… in love and admiration. Sometimes and sometimes[she] wanted her heart to roast on a black stick" [47].

Leopolda is trying at the same time to catch Marie, because she wants to save 'Marie's soul and she likely sees herself at fourteen in Marie. At the convent, Marie is called " Marie, Star of the sea" (54), but Leopolda insists that she will shine only after they have" burned off the dark corrosion' (54). The corrosion, however, seems to be the influence of the Catholic Church; Marie shines after she leaves the convent when she takes care of numerous biological and adopted children and eventually becomes a preserver of tribal tradition.

The fishing motif in" Saint Marie' illustrates the struggle between the teenager and the nun, a struggle reminiscent of a fisherman with an unruly fish on his line. Marie, seeking escape from the Lazarres, a better life, and a mother figure, is vulnerable to the lure of the convent and Leopalda's cruel attention. Marie never describes her home life in detail, but mentions it several times with nothing but disdain throughout the novel, even referring to her mother as" the old drunk woman who I didn't claim as my mother anymore" (85). At the convent she seeks the love and spiritual stability she lacks at home from the only other mother figure she's known: Sister Leopolda has a stake in Marie's spiritual life both as a nun an and as Marie's biological mother. The two women are competing with each other for the love and devotion they lack elsewhere. The fishing metaphor works both ways throughout the story as Marie is both the bait and the fish on the hook. Marie fights for the upper hand with nun, which she ultimately achieves. In her retrospective account, however, she realizes not only her own vulnerability or "ignorance," but also that Leopolda made to get me in her clutch" (44). In this metaphor, Marie is irresistible "bait" (44) for the "starving, spiritually cannibalistic" nun (Jaskioski 31). Thus the fishing analogy underscores the danger Marie faces when she enters the convent, for Leoplda is intent on saving the " reservation girl's " (43) soul, which to this means that Marie

must give up her Ojibwa identity and dedicate her life to God. Leopolda tells Marie she has "two choices…marry a no good Indian, bear his brats, die like a dog. Or two, you can give yourself to God" (48).

The next time Marie narrates a story in " The Beads" Erdrich uses water's ability to gradually diminish stones as a metaphor for the culture and waves carrying a boat as a metaphor for survival. In the first section of the story, Marie holds a set of Cree prayer beads and imagines them as stones at the bottom of a river being worn down, an image reminiscent of the Ojibwa people whose identities are worn away as they become assimilated. June Morrissey, nine years old, who survived in the woods eating pine sap, is wearing the beads around her neck when she is brought to live with Marie and Nector. Marie sees sadness in June that she "couldn't touch… A hurt place, it was deep, it was with her all the time like a broken rib that stabbed when she breathed" (91) the beads remind Marie of stones being "rolled aimless by the wave….polished. To many people it would be a kindness. But I see no kindness in how waves are grinding them smaller and smaller until they finally disappear" (96). The image of slowly being worn down is especially poignant considering June's worn - down and broken state in the first chapter of the novel. But here Marie is also thinking of all native Americans. The goal of assimilation was to make native Americans cultures disappear, June represents the represents the results of this effort, as does Marie's son Gordie, who marries June when they are still teenagers. In a later chapter, when Gordie is in the process of drinking himself to death, Marie speaks to him in the old language. Shaking off Kashpaw pride, yet holding to the old strengths Rushes Bear has taught her. Gordie is the perfect example of bad influence of Euro-Americanization. He is "confronted with the alien dominant culture that Marie considers largely responsible for the grim situation of Gordie and other Indians who

have lost their connection to their heritage by trying to assimilate, she becomes even more committed to traditional Chippewa values" (Chavkin 104). The fate of the culture is in the hands of the members of the tribe and no one else. Marie has lost faith in anything that isn't from the Ojibwa tradition. Gordie's generation suffered the most, having come of age at the height of the assimilation efforts and not yet learned the value of preservation or understanding the scope of what was lost.

Marie's vision of being on a boat during the birth of her baby mirrors Lulu's experience in "The Island." They are both "cut off from their heritage," and Marie, like Lulu, is "in search of a mother to product and guide [her]" (Chavkin 102). The vision also represents the repaired relationship between Marri and her mother-in – law as Rushes Bear becomes like a mother to Marie after the birth. Before Rushes Bear was there for her as she nearly died in childbirth, Marie didn't like the old woman and merely tolerated her presence because she was Nector's mother. In *Love Medicine*, for Marie the boat takes the form of a world in the old language, while for Lulu the boat is literal. For all three characters, the boat is a means to connect with the old ways.

In "The Island," an act of rebellion turns into a search for a more complete understanding of her mother as Lulu rediscovers her Ojibwa identity after she rows a boat out to Moses Pillager's island. Because she shouldn't, Lulu decides to visit Moses and pursue him sexually. Initially she makes her decision in order to upset Rushes.

By visiting the island and finding her mother in spirit, Lulu rediscovers her place in the history of the tribe and eventually her place in the greater community. Lulu may not find her actual mother, but she returns to where she came from and speaks the old language again. Lulu is still recovering from being abandoned by her mother, but "implicit in this feeling of being abandoned is the unconscious and

irrational feeling of responsibility for the situation, "because " Lulu is sent to government boarding school, where the primary objective is to transform 'uncivilized Indians' into 'true Americans" (Chavkin 96). Lulu wasn't just abandoned by her mother; she was also forced to abandon her native American identity at the boarding school. Her visit to the island is an attempt to get that connection back by "uniting with the Pillager spirit (the embodiment of her heritage) and discover[ing] her roots" (Chavkin 97-98). She is afraid to give birth on the island, but she stays, despite her fear that the baby might "drag [her] under and drown [her]" (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 84). Lulu doesn't have a sense of what it means to be a mother, because she didn't have the experience of having a mother herself. But Lulu end up having many children and with each one she becomes more in tune with her native American identity. Lulu stays above water throughout the novel, eventually becoming friends with Marie, and both women become influential members of their and proponents of the preservation of their culture.

The next generation has a harder time connecting with the past, as seen in the live and deaths of June, Gordie, and Henry, who are all associated with drowning and being underwater, and who are all suicidal. Henry commits suicide by jumping into the river, Gordie's last drinking binge clearly indicates a wish for death, and although June briefly rises above the water's surface at the moment of her death, Albertine suggests that "even drunk [June would] have known a storm was coming"(10). All three struggles with their day-to –day lives. June struggles to keep a job and never sends for her son as she intended, Gordie is violent and begins drinking heavily after June's death, and Henry never recovers from his experience as a soldier in Vietnam. Worn down by their isolation, they eventually give up on life. Henry intentionally commits suicide, but he does so by jumping into the river and not fighting the current.

June and Gordie also cause their own deaths by ceasing their efforts to survive: Gordie succumbs to alcohol, and June walks into a snowstorm. All three of these characters live out Marie's fear of being worn down to nothing June is associated with sinking or drowning when she is alive, signifying a disconnect with her heritage, but just before her death, she "walks over [the snow] like water" (7), showing that she is able to find a connection to the larger culture, if only fleetingly. June is clearly struggling in the opening scene of the novel. She is out of money, and on her way home where no one expects her. Everything about her is broken: the door to her room doesn't lock, she shirt under her jacket is ripped, and her skin feels "hard and brittle," like she might "fall apart at the slightest touch" (4). She leaves the bar with a mud engineer, and when she gets out of his truck on the prairie, she falls out into the cold, which gives her "a shock like being born" (6). June's rebirth, and her death moments later, change her status in the novel from a down – and her death moments later, changes her status in the novel from a down – out aunt her mother who has abandoned both of her sons to "feminine Christ figure resurrected as trickster, the fragmented culture hero made whole within memory and story, returning through the annual cycle of Easer /spring – death/resurrection – to her Indian community as mythic catalyst" (Owens 196). June avoids drowning metaphorically, by walking on snow lie water at the time of her death and she lives on in the stories of the people who knew her. Erdrich uses storytelling as a method of preservation and survival throughout *Love Medicine.* June's death seems to save her, in a sense, because her family continues to tell stories about her keep her alive in their memories. Because June is on her way home in the opening scene, the novel appears at first to be a traditional Native American homecoming novel. June's homecoming, however, doesn't occur until the end of the novel when her abandoned son Lipsha metaphorically brings her home;

therefore, "the native does not develop directly out of the problems. Caused by a return; it arise out of questions raised by the failed return" (Silberman 138). June survives after death because the other characters ask questions about her life in order to understand their own. Like a trickster, June "moves freely, after death, in the thoughts and stores of the other characters" (Owens 196). Although June fails to find a connection to her heritage as an adult, her spiritual homecoming affirms her Native identity in a way that she could not during her life. She struggled to find a place in the world, she had an abusive husband, she abandoned two children, but she had an impact on the people who loved her. June's death leaves the people who knew her and loved her with stronger connections to each other, and because she lives on in stories she continues to have an effect on the community.

June's husband, Gordie, does not literally drown, but he is associated with images of sinking underwater, and he eventually drowns himself in alcohol. In "Resurrection," Gordie has a flashback to his honeymoon with June, "a strangely joyless and enervating trip" (Chavkin 105) .in the lake by their rented cabin, they try to make love in the water, but Gordie" gulped water convulsively, then sank in [June's] arms" (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 271). Although, they are young and in love, their identities are still unformed and they sink under the weight of their confusion and disconnect from their culture. Away from the reservation, it is clear that they are "cut off from their heritage" and " are dommed" (Chavkin 105). Their attempt to make love inside the cabin doesn't go much better, and "their listless, passionless sex symbolizes the emptiness of their lives. Lacking a strong identification with their culture, out of contact with their souls, they self-destruct" (Chavkin 105). In "Crown of Thorns," after hitting a deer with his car, Gordie puts it in the backseat in order to trade it for booze. The deer is only stunned, and when it wakes up he hits it with a tire

iron. Gordie was physically abusive to June during their marriage, and hitting the deer reminds him of how he used to hit June. Although non-Native readers would interpret this scene as " a delusion brought on alcohol and grief," in the Chippewa world view the deer is June's ghost, and " according to traditional Chippewa custom, a dead wife's returning to visit the husband who abused her would not be surprising" (Ruppert 74). Gordiebe lives he has killed June and goes to the convent to confess. Gordie runs away from the nun who hears his confession, dippers into a field, and can be heard "crying like a drowned person" (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 229). Shortly after this incident, Gordie drinks himself to death.

In " A Bridge," Lulu's son, Henry Junior has recently returned from serving as a soldier in Vietnam, and he needs a bridge from the white government's war back to the reservation and his life as a Native American. Albertine, who has run away from home, follows Henry from the bus station because he "could have been a Chippewa" (169) and she finds comfort in his familiar looks. Sitting in a bar, she asks for a trick, and Henry obliges by getting steak knives and glasses from the bartender and "interlapp[ing] the knives so they made a bridge between the glass lips, a bridge of knives suspended in air" (173). It is telling that the bridge Henry builds is made of sharp objects suspended delicately between the glasses. The delicate bridge would not hold any weight, and Henry's heaviness is mentioned twice. The first time occurs when Henry puts his arm around Albertine and she" stumbles once beneath its weight" (173). Later, Henry poses for a picture with Lyman, and Henry puts his arm carefully over Luyman's shoulder "as though it was too heavy" (189). Henry's weight, metaphorically the weight of the trauma of his war experience, eventually pulls his underwater. Henry "lacks a bridge back to a healthy life, "and the bridge he builds for Albertine is "dangerous and impassable" (Wong 92). Later in the motels room, Henry

thinks "of diving off a riverbank, a bridge" (Erdrich *Love Medicine* 179) and eventually follows through with the vision, in "The Red Convertible"

Lulu says Moses pillager told her that the worst death for a Chippewa is drowning, because the soul can never rest. Henry is unable to pull himself out of his postwar depression, and even though his brother Lyman tries to help him, Henry commits suicide by jumping in a river. In his effort to help Henry, Lyman damages their car, hoping to get Henry's attention. It works, but only so far as that Henry fixes the car and suggests they drive out "to see the high water" (190). Henry's experience at war is even more soul-destroying than Lulu's experience at government school, and his struggle to readjust to normal life upon his return is not as simple as post-traumatic stress disorder. The acts Henry had to perform in Vietnam were "out of harmony with the Chippewa sense of war, death, honor and right thinking…He does not go off to war with a vision that will give him power, nor does he dance the warrior's dance. He has not participated in any ritual actions that will let the souls of his dead enemies rest" (Rupert 73). His post-traumatic stress can be attributed to the clash of cultures. He fought the white man's war, and he "is not purified of the spirits of dead enemies when he returns" (73). At the river, Lyman fells like he experiences what Henry is going through at that moment as they stare at the river which is "just at its limit, hard swollen, glossy like an old gray scar" (Erdrich, *Love Medicine*190). Lyman felt "something squeezing inside [him] and tightening and trying to let go all the same time" (191). Henry, like the river, has reached his limit; he jumps in. Henry passively lets the ricer fill his boots, or in other words, wear him down by taking his. He commits suicide by not fighting, by being passive, and letting the revere overtake him Henrys' actions echo Nectar's plunge into the lake when he's trying to decide between his wife and his lover, "but while Nectar achieves at least a temporary

purification by immersing himself in water, Henry Junior gains a permanent watery relief from his haunted life" (Wong 91-92). Lyman goes in the river to try to rescues him, but when he is unable to find his brother, Lyman sends the car into the river, destroying his link to his brother and their shared history.

Nector's passivity prevents him from making decisions and taking responsibility for his actions. Only once does he try to make a decision-to leave Marie for Lulu. During the decision-making process, Nector dives naked into the lake where the water monster Missepeshu lives, in an attempt "to confront the monsters in his life for the first time" (Owens 203). Nector dives down "to the bottom of the lake where it was cold, dark, still, like the pit bottom of a grave" (138). He even wonders if he "should have stayed there and never fought" (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 138). Nector's passive attitude, his inability or unwillingness to act on behalf of his family or his culture is his greatest failure. The Kashpaws are "respected as the last hereditary leaders of this tribe" (122), but Nector's Native American identity is all in his appearance. Nector represents the tribe in Washington, but for the most part, like his time in Hollywood, he just looks good being Indian. He is incapable of the tribe.

Erdrich revisits the fishing motif in the chapters about the youngest generation to illustrate the potential elusiveness of identity for characters like king, Albertine, and Lipsha. King imagines himself stuck below the surface with the minnows, but Albertine and Lipsha are associated with above-water images. It is not so simple, however, as being above water. It is no longer enough to just be in the boat-you have to throw out a line and try to catch something. In "The world's Greatest Fishermen," June's death brings the Kashpaw family together and King, Albertine, and Lipsha are all at the Kashpaw house. Although they have grown up together and are around the same age, they are very different. King is most assimilated: he lives in the Twins

cities, drives a sports car he purchased with insurance money from June's death, and he has married a white girl. Although the title is a reference to a hat king wears, it also refers to king, Albertine, and Lipsha as the fisher men of culture, history, and family stories.

Water imagery in "crossing the water" reinforces the emphasis the novel places on the connection between staying above water and being secure in one's Native American identity. When Lipsha Morrissey discovers who his parents are, he resents the fact that everyone else knew all along. He steals Grandma kashpaw's money stash (at her subtle urging) and leaves the reservation, but when he reaches a border town, "shame rolled over [him] like wave and a tidal wash" (339). He goes to king Kashpaw's apartment because he a vision that Gerry Nanapush, his father, will break out of prison soon. Lipsha, king, and Gerry play cards, and when Gerry insists on a significant wager, Lipshasuggests they play for the car that everyone known as "June's car (357)). Because Gerry and Lipsha are both descended from Old Man Pillager, and they both learned to cheat at cards from Lulu, king doesn't stand a chance. Later, on the ride to the Canadian border, Lipsha feels for the first time what it is like" to be a son to a father" (366). His journey ends when he crosses the bridge that leads to the reservation and "thus becomes a complete human being – an experienced adult, a loving son, a healer and a trickster/transformer. He feels all the threads of identity intertwining and forming a pattern" (Rupert 80).

Lipsha, as the son of a trickster, functions as a trickster himself in the novel because a trickster's job is "to create to the form of the word" (80). After Lipsha drops Gerry off at the border, he goes back to the reservation in "June's car." He pauses on the bridge that crosses the river that separates the reservation from the rest of the world. As he stands on the bridge, he "remembered how the reservation from the rest

of offer tobacco to the water" (Erdirch, *Love Medicine* 366). Lipsha's remembrance of an old tradition signifies his return home. He thinks of June and forgives her for abandoning him, knowing that "the son she acknowledged suffered more than Lipsha Morrissey did" (367) and that he was lucky to have been raised by Grandma Kashpaw. Lipsha looks at the river, remembering that he'd "heard that this river was the last of an ancient ocean, miles deep that once had covered the Dakotas and solved all our problems. It was easy to still imagine us beneath them vast unreasonable waves, but the truth is we live on dry land" (367). Lipsha's homecoming emphasizes survival and the importance of the connection to the for understanding the present, and his arrival gives the novel a hopeful ending by affirming that the Ojibwa live on dry land. When he gets back to the reservation it is clear that "Lipsha has finally arrived at a coherent sense of his place within the community (including the land itself) from which identity springs" (owens 196). Lipsha Morrissey overcomes his personal and cultural identity crisis by running away from the reservation and realizing that the reservation is not only his home, but only place he belongs.

Love Medicine stands alone as a novel about three generations of Ojibwa people in the twentieth century, Erdrich certainly sets these characters up to seem doomed, and some, like Gordie and Henry Junior are doomed by their own isolation. For the most part, her characters find a way to anchor themselves on the reservation. No longer as tied to the land, Marie and Lulu form large families and do what they can to hold them together. Lipsha and Albertine, of the next generation, see their parents, aunts, and uncles struggle to make sense of their identities, understand the importance of reaching into the past and connecting with history.

In *Love Medicine* the characters were predestined for certain interactions. Nector's betrayal of Lulu over her land is an echo of his role in the betrayal of Fleur

over her land. Lulu's reticence to name the fathers of her children echoes the mystery around her own parentage. Marie's attraction to the Covent not only echoes pauline's obsession with cathoicism as a mechanism for dealing with trauma, but revises pauline's internal identity struggle. When Marie leaves the convent, she becomes immersed in the Ojibwa culture and gives up Catholicism. Erdrich says herself that water is the dominant image in the book, and like water, the image functions in many different ways. Water is powerful and life giving, as often as it is destructive and deadly, but for Erdrich water is ultimately a symbol of transformation and transcendence, because it allows life to go on.

Throughout *Love Medicine* stories have a healing effect on both individuals and the community, and stories often bring characters back to the community after they have temporarily lost their connection. In *Love Medicine*, June survives in her family's stories after her death. In "*The World's Greatest Fishermen*" telling stories about June helps her family begin to come to terms with her death. These novels, and the rest of Erdrich's work, are a way for her to "protect and celebrate" (Erdrich, "Where I Ought to be," 48) her culture, and clearly "the link between storytelling and survival is vital for Erdrich: it is through the storytelling of her characters that she asserts the survival of Chippewa culture" (Smith 99). Overwhelmingly, Erdrich's characters survive, and despite enormous loss, learn to protect and celebrate the Ojibwa tradition.

Many of the characters in the novel are struggling to maintain and achieve a connection to their heritage after several generations of loss of land coerced assimilation. Erdrich explores these struggles through water imagery. Although water operates in very different ways in each novel she uses it as a motif as she examines the native American experience in the twentieth century. As government policies alter

the Ojibwa way of life, the culture changes irrevocably, as does the Native people's sense of their own identity. The culture and identity that was as rooted to the land as the trees surrounding the shores of lake Matchimanito are disrupted by government policies that turned individuals into landowners and sent reservation children to boarding schools to become assimilated into the Euro-American culture. Fleur loses her power over lake because the people on reservation lose faith in her. It's not just fleur they lose faith in, however, but the old gods, the chances of their culture's survival, and themselves as well. Adapting to the changes imposed onto Ojibwa by the government is a necessary evil, but Nanapush finds a way to adapt and still preserve some part of his culture, in the form of storytelling.

Love Medicine depicts characters living in a world that has already changed: land has lost, the culture diluted, and Catholicism is pervasive. The characters in *Love* Medicine exist in a perpetual state of spiritual crisis, and Erdrich uses the water's surface as a borderland between those characters who can survive and thrive as Native Americans in the twentieth century, and those who literally or figuratively drown, pulled under by the weight of their own identity confusion. Many of the characters need to leave the reservation and return in order to discover what it means to be Native American in a vastly different world than the world of their ancestors. *Love Medicine,* in particular, follows this pattern as Marie, Lulu, Nector, and Lipsha all leave the reservation and return, for the most part more secure in their identities, or at least more certain that they belong on the reservation with their Native American community. Native American authors who write in English may intend to write for other Native Americans, but they must also acknowledge that their audience will likely consist of both Native and non-Native readers. The effect of this inevitably diverse readership creates "a richly hybridized dialogue aimed at those few with

privileged knowledge – the traditionally educational Indian reader – as well as those with claims to a privileged discourse – the Eurocentric reader" (Owens 14). This also forces the non-Native reader into the position of "other," (14) while at the same time allowing, even forcing, sensitive readers to learn about a culture they may have been previously unaware.

Erdrich explores the experience of Ojibwa people in the twentieth century in a realistic way that is accessible to all types of readers, thus introducing non-Native readers to a new experience and giving a marginalized culture a voice, all while exploring her own sense of her identity. As a half-Chippewa, half-German writer, she focuses on the experiences of the mixed-blood native American in the modern world and the confusion and contradictions that having a mixed ancestry entails. Her novels were among the first by a Native American author to achieve both critical and commercial success, which owens attributes to her portrayal "of the more universal trials of characters that just happen to be Indian or Indian-and-white, setting the multiple monodramas against a recognizable Indian world" (28). A big part of what makes Erdrich's work so appealing to readers of all backgrounds is her understanding of her mixed-blood back ground, and that "through the difficulty of embracing our own contradictions we gain sympathy for the range of ordinary failures and marvels" (Erdrich, "Conversations" 112). Her characters are native, mixed-blood, and white, but above all they are human and therefore both easy and impossible to understand.

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